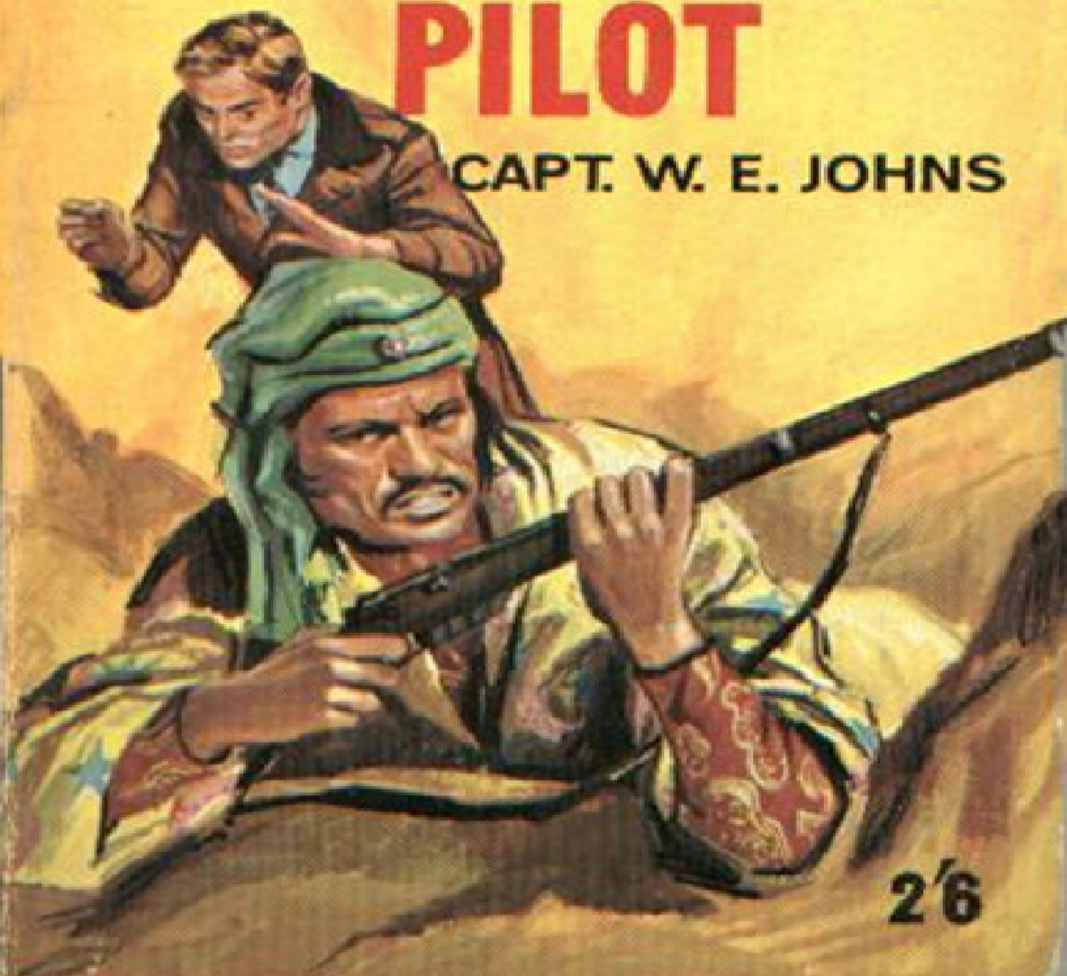




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PAPERBACKS for
Boys & Girls

BIGGLES CHARTER PILOT

CAPT. W. E. JOHNS



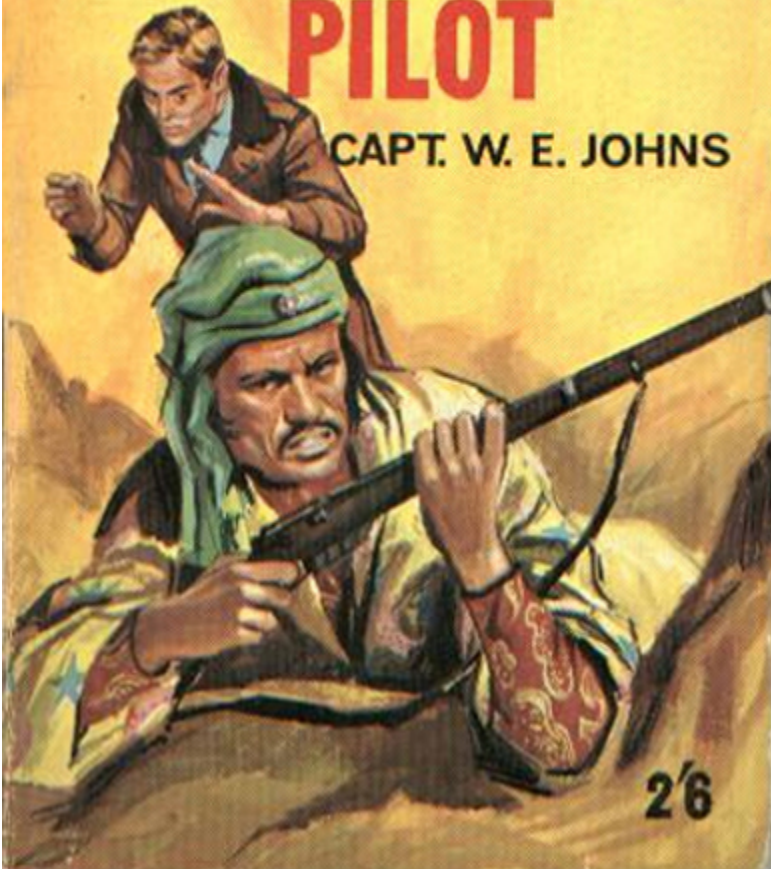
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THE ADVENTURE OF THE ENCHANTED

ISLAND

" THE nauseating part of living at a time like this, is that you can believe nothing you read and nothing you hear—absolutely nothing," remarked Flying-Officer Henry Harcourt gloomily, tossing aside the newspaper he had been reading.

Flying-Officer " Ginger " Hebblethwaite regarded the speaker sympathetically. "On the contrary, my poor cynical comrade," he observed, "the fascinating part of living at a time like this is to believe anything and everything."

" Do you believe anything?"

"I do, within the limits of possibility," answered Ginger. "And if you'd knocked around a bit instead of knocking a fives ball about at school, so would you."

Most of the officers of Number 666 (Fighter) Squadron, sometimes known in the Royal Air Force as Biggles's Squadron, were present, lounging round the mess fire. Dinner was over. The weather was bad, so although the squadron was at "ready ", there seemed little chance of it being called out.

The C.O., Squadron-Leader Bigglesworth, D.S.O., better known as Biggles ", sat in a tub chair, coffee at his elbow. Near him, lounging on the settee, were his flight-commanders, Flight-Lieutenants Algy Lacey, Lord Bertie Lissie, and Angus Mackail. Also there were

" Tug, " Carrington, " Tex" O'Hara " Ferocity " Ferris, and " Taffy " Hughes. "Toddy ", the station Adjutant, was twiddling the knobs of the radio.

Henry considered Ginger with affected disfavour. "So you'd believe anything?" he said sarcastically. "I think a statement like that needs qualifying. Just what have you seen that inclines you to such a pleasant state of mind ? "

"Oh, I've seen things," returned Ginger mysteriously. "Such as ? " insisted Henry.

Ginger thought for a moment. "Well, you've seen the C.O. knock down thins, but what would you say if I told you that I once saw him knock down a crab five feet across? "

Bertie Lissie started. "Five feet ! Here, young feller, I mean to say . . . Five feet ? "

Henry laughed raucously.

Ginger shrugged his shoulders. "There you are, you see." He appealed to Biggles with an air of injured dignity. "Do I speak the truth, sir ? " he inquired.

Biggles smiled, sipping his coffee. "Absolutely. Algy Lacey was there, too. He'll confirm it."

Ginger looked at Henry triumphantly. "There you are ! "

Henry still looked dubious. "That sounds a pretty tall tale to me. Suppose you tell us about it ? "

"Yes, come on," came in a chorus from the others. Ginger looked at Biggles inquiringly.

"Shall I tell them ? "

"If you like."

"All right," agreed Ginger. "But before I start, I don't ask anyone to believe this tale if he doesn't want to. I'll just state the facts. Biggles and Algy can pull me up if I overstep the mark."

" Shoot, " invited Toddy, joining the party.

Ginger settled down in his chair, and this is the story he told : As most of you know, Biggles taught me all I know about flying. We did a lot of shows together, mostly civil flying, before the war. Between times we shared the same flat, but we always had a machine parked somewhere in case anything turned up. Once, during a slack period, Biggles put an advertisement in the newspapers offering to do charter work, anywhere, for anybody. At the time we had an old amphibian named the Wanderer moored on the water at Hamble.

Well, the morning after the advertisement appeared we had our first client. He was the very last person on earth

you would expect. If I hadn't been so fascinated by him I should have laughed. He was a little old fellow with an enormous head and gold-rimmed spectacles balanced on the end of his nose. He wore a frock coat that must have been out of date before most of us were born, striped trousers, and buttoned boots with cloth tops. He carried a top hat in his hand, and a whacking great umbrella hung on his arm. His age—well, it might have been anything, but if we say sixty we shan't be far wrong. But, except for a few eccentricities, and an irritating habit of absent-mindedness, he was wide awake. There were no flies on Dr. Augustus Duck. That was his name, although naturally behind his back we called him "Donald ". It turned out that he was a biologist, which, for the benefit of those who don't know what it means, is a fellow who studies the science of life—birds, plants, and so on.

Donald came to us with an idea. He was agog with excitement because a new island had just popped up in the Atlantic. Apparently this is not such an unusual thing as you might suppose, and he gave us instances of where it had happened before; only these islands had always disappeared again before anyone could have a really good look at them. The new island, and its position, had been reported by radio from a ship, which happened to be a fast mail packet, and for that reason couldn't stop to investigate. The Admiralty had sent off a survey cutter to have a look at the new arrival, but Donald was anxious to get there first and so take credit for any discoveries that were going. He was afraid, too, that the island might disappear before the cutter got to it. There is no doubt that he was genuinely interested from the scientific point of view. All that was known about the island was that it was roughly three miles long and a mile wide.

Donald didn't look worth half a crown, and I imagine it was for that reason that Biggles told him right away that flying was an expensive business. Did that worry him? Not a bit.

He told us that money was no object. He'd got more than he knew what to do with. That settled the only difficulty, and we soon had the necessary arrangements made. He was to meet us at dawn the following morning, at Hamble.

He arrived in a taxi, complete with umbrella, still wearing his top hat and frock coat.

You'd have thought he was going to a funeral instead of on an exploring trip. You never saw such a pile of junk as he brought with him—cases, crates, bags, fishing-nets, and goodness knows what else. This, it turned out, was his scientific paraphernalia—

instruments, preserving bottles, and the like.

After we had got everything packed in the cabin he discovered that he had mislaid his glasses. He thought he must have dropped them on the floor, so we had to unpack again.

Then he found them in his pocket. He was always losing his glasses. I don't want to give you the impression that he was a mere crank. On the contrary, he was a brilliant scholar, but the fact is he was so absorbed in his work that anything not connected with it was trivial. He had plenty of nerve, too. Well, we got away eventually and headed for the island, which, according to the position given by the ship, and the speed of the Wanderer, meant a flight of about six hours.

It turned out that this was Donald's first flight, but it was plain to see that he wasn't interested in flying. He was only concerned with getting there. He didn't once look out of the window; he squatted on a crate and read a book. But when the island came into sight he produced an enormous telescope and made me hold up the big end while he squinted through it. I had a look at the island, but there wasn't much to see. It was, in fact, just what you would expect of something that had come up from the bottom of the sea—a mass of seaweed-covered boulders with pools of water between. There was no question of landing on it because there wasn't a flat patch anywhere. Fortunately the sea was calm, so Biggles brought the machine down on the water and taxied to a convenient promontory where we made fast.

Donald, not forgetting his umbrella, was the first to land. He fairly danced with excitement. "Enchanting", was all he could say. "Positively enchanting." Personally, I couldn't see anything enchanting about it. It was just a dirty slimy mass. Anyway, there we were,

and there appeared to be nothing for us to do except wait for Donald to finish his investigations and then take him home. He wasn't long making his first discovery. It was an eel, but such a monster as no one had ever seen before. It was about forty feet long.

Luckily, it was dead. It had split up the middle; Donald said this was where it had burst when it had come to the surface. When the enormous pressure of water to which it was accustomed had been relaxed, it had exploded like a balloon in thin air. I remember asking him if everything he found would be dead from the same cause, and he said not necessarily, because the island might have collected creatures on the way up from the sea bed. And he was right, as you'll presently hear.

Well, the Doctor wandered about, exploring, while Biggles, Algy and myself hung about near the machine. We discovered that the rock of which the island was composed was very light, like pumice stone. In fact, that's what it was, from which we reckoned that somewhere down below there was a volcano. As you probably know, pumice stone is only solidified lava. When we threw a piece on the water it floated, so it was fairly easy to see what had happened. The island was just a mass of lava that had come adrift from the floor of the sea. An earthquake may have shaken it loose, or thrown it up. Anyway, it wasn't an island in the true sense of the word because the whole thing was floating, like a colossal raft. Little waterspouts here and there suggested that it was settling down in the water, but I don't think any of us realized that the thing was sinking again. We should have

guessed it, because the island was certainly not more than two miles long by half a mile wide, which was a good deal smaller than the ship had reported. No doubt the ship's estimate was right, but the island was sinking even then; and as it submerged, naturally, it got smaller.

After a time I left Biggles and Algy unpacking the lunch basket which we had brought with us, and went off to see what I could find. There was more to see than I expected.

The place was littered with shells. Oysters—you never saw such monsters in your life.

They were the size of drums. The mussels were as big as bath-tubs—one would have made a meal for a squadron of men. They were still alive' too, and I took care to keep clear of them. Of course, this should have warned me that everything was likely to be on the same scale—but it's easy to think of these things afterwards.

The pools of water were inky black, but illuminated at the bottom with all sorts of coloured lights, mostly green and blue. Some of them were stationary; others waved about, like searchlights. I remembered reading once in a book on deep sea exploration that most of the fish at great depths are luminous, and now I was able to see it for myself.

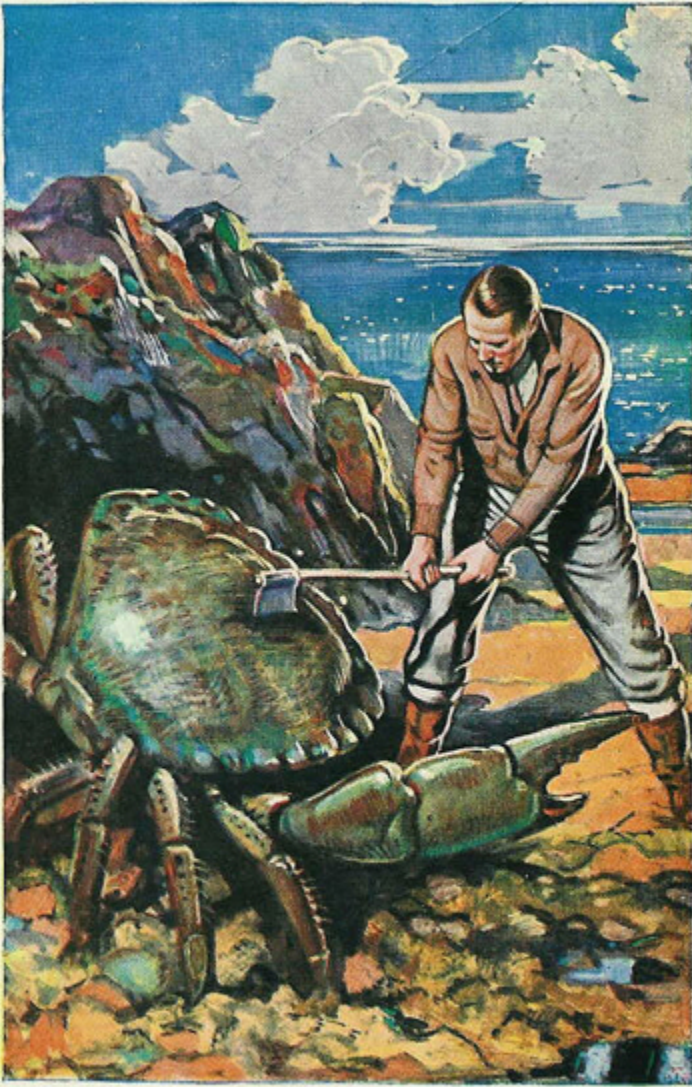
Near the edge of one of the pools, just below the surface, there was a wonderful greenish glow the size of a dinner-plate, so I thought I'd fish the thing up to see what it was. I thought the Doctor would be glad to have it, so I lay down and put my hand in the water.

I say I put my hand in, but I didn't get as far as that. The instant my fingers touched the water I thought I'd been shot. I got an electric shock that threw me yards. The thing must have been an electric eel, or something of the sort. Feeling pretty silly, I was picking myself up, and at the same time looking to see if Biggles had noticed what a fool I'd made of myself, when I got another shock. Coming towards me was the father of all crabs. You couldn't imagine such a brute. The shell was a good five feet across ; and the two big claws—well, they were big enough to tear a man in halves if they got hold of him.

There was no doubt that the brute had been stalking me, and if the electric shock hadn't bowled me over he would have caught me in the rear, too. As soon as it saw that I'd spotted it, it stopped, and started making a clicking noise, like a grandfather clock ticking, only louder. Its eyes, which were black, and stuck out on things like rods, were fixed on me. I started to back away, but as soon as I moved it came on

with a rush. I went off with a rush, too, yelling for Biggles.

Fortunately, Biggles and Algy weren't far away. They heard me yell, and came at the double' to see what was going on. As long as I live I shan't forget Algy's face when he saw that crab. Biggles shouted to him to fetch the emergency axe from the machine, and presently he came back with it and the rifle which we always carried. Biggles took the axe. He was only just in time, too, for the brute was close behind me. When it saw that there were two of us it got into a flat spin, as if it couldn't make up its mind which one to go for. It decided on Biggles. I heaved a rock at it, but as it happened Biggles didn't need any help. He jumped aside as the crab made a grab at him and at the first slash with the axe severed one of its long claws. It was horrible to see the way the claw went on opening and shutting after it had been cut off. Then, running in on the clawless side, Biggles sank the axe in the middle of the brute's shell. The crab spat at him, and you



Biggles sank the axe in the middle of the
brute's shell

(Page 13)

never smelt such a foul stink in your life. Anyway, it had had enough, and blundered off into a pond taking the axe with it. I don't mind telling you that when we looked at each other we were all pretty green about the gills.

Then Biggles said, "Where's the Doctor? If there are things like that about he'll lose his life."

I said I didn't know where he was, but the last time I saw him he was wandering towards the middle of the island.

There was a big mass of rock just in front of us obstructing our view, so with one accord we made a rush for the top of it. You can't imagine the sight that met our eyes. A couple of hundred yards away was the Doctor, running like a sprinter, waving his umbrella. In the ordinary way this might have been funny, but there was nothing humorous in the situation, believe me. The thing that came after Donald made me feel sick in the stomach. How shall I describe it?

It was a great grey slobbering mass the size of a barrage balloon—or it looked that size to me. The colour was elephant grey, and in fact, it might have been an enormous elephant without any legs. It seemed to roll and bounce over the ground. Around it were what appeared to be a mass of snakes. They were its tentacles, for the thing was a great octopus—or rather, according to the Doctor, a decapod, which has ten arms instead of eight. The two front ones were the longest. I've seen an octopus with tentacles twenty feet long, but these must have been nearer fifty, and they were covered with suckers, like dirty plates.

Well, Biggles grabbed the rifle from Algy, and dropping on one knee, opened fire.

Knowing how Biggles can shoot there was no doubt that he hit it, but he might as well have aimed at a tank for all the effect the bullets had. The monster was overtaking Donald, and it seemed to me that nothing could save him. Biggles dropped the rifle, tore to the machine, and came back with a spare can of petrol, unscrewing the cap as he came. For a minute I couldn't make out what he was going to do with it; in any case, I thought he would be too late, for the Doctor was about whacked. Algy was shooting, but he might as well have saved the cartridges. To tell the truth, I had begun to wonder if any of us would get away, for if the decapod had got its tentacles over the wings of the Wanderer it would either have smashed them to pulp or pulled the whole machine under water.

Biggles ran straight by us towards the Doctor. As soon as he reached him he swung the petrol can round so that it splashed spirit all over the place. Then he dropped a match on it and bolted. It was about time, for the two leading tentacles were within a few feet of him. The petrol went up with a whoosh, singeing Biggles's eyebrows. He didn't wait to see what happened to the beast, but turned and bolted back to us.

I was still at a fairly safe distance, so I saw what happened. When the petrol caught, and the flames leapt round the decapod's tentacles, the brute reared up, waving its tentacles in the air, screaming like a frightened horse. Then it began to back away. Was I relieved? I

ll say I was.

Donald reached us just in front of Biggles. Do you know what he said? Remarkable "

was the word he used. "Really, most remarkable. We must try to capture the creature."

How he thought he was going to do that I don't know. I didn't stop to ask him. Neither did Biggles' who at that moment ran up. He grabbed Donald by the arm and began bundling him towards the aircraft.

"Dear—dear," exclaimed the Doctor. "What's the hurry ? "

With the sea monster now a safe distance away I couldn't understand what Biggles was getting so excited about, until he waved his arm and invited us to look at the island. For a moment I couldn't make out what had happened. It was only half the size it was when we landed.

"Great Scott ! " I yelled, suddenly understanding. " It's sinking! "

"Wait a minute," chipped in Donald. "I must watch this. Dear me ! Now where did I put my glasses ? "

He began feeling in his pockets, but Biggles grabbed him by the collar and fairly pushed him into the machine. I wasn't far behind. I didn't mind watching the island sink—but I didn't want to be standing on it when it went down.

By the time we were all aboard, and Biggles had cast off, it began to look as if we should be lucky to get away after all, for the water started to toss, and rock, and foam, and the poor old Wanderer was banging herself this way and that. Big seas started to roll-but you can imagine what it must have been like, with all that mass of rock sinking. Of course, once the waves started breaking over the rim of the island it started to go down like a bowl with a hole in the bottom.

I shan't forget the next two or three minutes in a hurry. I've seen some nasty seas, but this was no ordinary storm. The breakers didn't roll up from one direction so there was no question of keeping the nose of the aircraft into them; they came rushing on us from every quarter,

although you couldn't see much for spray. One minute we were spinning in a whirlpool; the next we were poised on the top of a sea, or sliding down into the trough.

How the machine stood up to such a battering without going to pieces I don't profess to understand. I was sea-sick.

Biggles got the engine started. Talk about a take-off! You never saw anything like it in your life. Haifa dozen times I thought it was all over. To this day I don't know how Biggles kept the machine on even keel and eventually got it to unstick. I saw a whacking great sea

roaring
down on us like an express train; then there was a sickening roll, a jerk, and we were in the air.

By the time we 'were clear of the water and I had a chance to look down, all that remained of the island were a few of the highest rocks. Then, as we watched, they too disappeared. Donald didn't seem to be in the least upset about our narrow escape. All he could say was, "What a pity—what a pity ". Of course, we had to run into a head wind on the way home, with the result that we were forced to make a night landing with a conking engine. Our tank was dry by the time we had taxied the machine to her mooring.

That was our first trip with Dr. Augustus Duck, but it wasn't the last, by a long shot. He was tickled to death with flying as a quick means of getting about, and as he had plenty of money, he must go rushing off all over the face of the earth to solve the biological mysteries about which he had been collecting information for years. I'll tell you about some of those trips another day.

Ginger turned to Henry. "Now perhaps you understand what I mean when I say that it doesn't do to disbelieve a thing because you haven't seen it yourself. Wait till I tell you about—"

Biggles broke in. I think that will do for one evening," he said, looking at the clock. "It's time we went to bed. The squadron's on early patrol in the morning, don't forget."

II

THE ADVENTURE OF THE ABOMINABLE

CAVEMAN

LUNCH over, the members of Biggles's squadron had passed into the ante-room, there to amuse themselves according to individual taste until two o'clock, when the squadron was scheduled for gunnery practice.

Lord Bertie Lissie picked up a picture magazine devoted to topical events, and flipping idly through the pages stopped at a photograph depicting the re-occupation of Abyssinia.

"I say, you know," he remarked, adjusting his monocle, "the jolly old Abyssinians look a wild and woolly lot, don't they? I mean to say—look at their mops of fuzzy hair. Pretty ferocious, what ? "

"Yes, they're tough," agreed Ginger. "They remind me of—but never mind."

"Here, come on, you can't leave it like that, you know," protested Bertie. "What do they remind you of ? "

"For a guess, I should say they remind him of the Abominable Caveman," put in Biggles, smiling.

"Was he another one of the weird and wonderful animals you encountered during your tour with Dr. Augustus Duck ? " inquired Tug Carrington, a trifle sarcastically.

"Yes, but he wasn't an animal," returned Biggles. " Bishimbi was a man."

" Bishimbi ? "

"That's what the natives called him."

"The natives of where?" demanded Tex O'Hara. "The original natives of Walleroo Island."

"Where's that ? "

Algy Lacy tossed aside the book he was trying to read. "Better tell them the story, Biggles," he said sadly. "Now you've said as much as you have they won't be satisfied until they hear the rest."

"Ginger can tell it," returned Biggles. "He's better at this sort of thing than I am. Go ahead, Ginger."

Ginger settled back on the settee while the others gathered round, and

this is the story he told:

As you will have guessed, the first we knew about the existence of the Abominable Caveman was through Donald, otherwise Dr. Augustus Duck. We were in Africa when he remembered this particular gentleman, so he turned up his notes about him in what he called his register of rare events. In order that you may get a clear picture of the scene of action I'll tell you, in as few words as possible, what Donald's register revealed.

Strung out along the south-west coast of Africa are scores of islands, some large, some small. For the most part they are wild, devoid of vegetation, and inhabited by seals, penguins, and countless millions of sea-birds. Between them and the mainland the tides rage and race, making navigation difficult, and as there are few harbours, ships give the islands a wide berth. For this reason most of the islands are uninhabited, and nobody hears much about them. The one with which we are concerned is called Walleroo Island, which really means Labyrinth Island. No doubt the original natives named it that because the rock of which it is composed is honeycombed with caves. Over thousands of years the breakers of the South Atlantic have bored right into the heart of the island, so when a big sea is running it shakes like a jelly; this, I may tell you, is a bit alarming until you get used to it. It isn't as bad as Mercury Island, a little lower down the coast, where seas meet under the middle of the island and leap up through a blow-hole in the centre.

Labyrinth Island is British. It's about five piles long and three-quarters of a mile wide.

About twelve miles from the southern tip is another island called Wreck Island. At one time it was German, but after the last war the South African Government took it over and leased it to a private whaling company as a depot for their ships. Both islands are roughly twenty miles from the mainland.

At the time of which I am speaking, Labyrinth Island was uninhabited except for a monster called the Abominable Caveman—the expression being a literal translation from the language of the Hottentots whom it put to flight. Apparently, the first inhabitants of the island were Portuguese; some five centuries ago, no doubt because Labyrinth Island has a harbour, Portuguese ships were in the habit of calling there for rain-water which lies about in the pot-holes. A little settlement sprang up. The settlers built a village of tiny stone houses which are still there. When or why they went nobody seems to know.

Perhaps they got fed up with

the place, which is hardly to be wondered at, for of all the dismal places I've ever seen Labyrinth Island is about the worst. Anyhow, they went, leaving behind them the houses, a church and a graveyard—of which you will hear more presently.

In comparatively recent times the village was occupied by Hottentots from the mainland.

They didn't go there because they liked it. They went there at the request of the Government to collect penguin eggs, which have a ready sale in South Africa and in swaggar London hotels. They fetch around a shilling apiece, and as the Hottentots got a fair share of the profits they did very well indeed. A Government cutter used to call for the eggs every two or three weeks and leave stores for the collectors. One day the cutter called to find the egg-collectors in a funny mood. For a long time they wouldn't say what was wrong, but eventually they admitted that they were being frightened out of their wits by something which they called the Abominable Caveman. They described it as a hairy giant in human form who made the night hideous with his howlings, and amused himself by disinterring the corpses from the graveyard and gnawing the bones. At least, he left the bones scattered about, so the natives assumed that was what he did. Well, the cutter men told the natives not to be silly, and sailed away. The next time they called there were no eggs and no collectors. They'd gone. Some were afterwards rounded up on the mainland, and they admitted that they couldn't stand life on the island with an Abominable Caveman prowling about.

Now all this, which occurred two or three years before our visit, was a serious blow for the Government. Naturally, they sent watchers to the island, but not a sign of the horrific caveman did they see. What, then, had the natives seen? That they had seen something was certain, for when questioned the description given by each man was identical. They described the Abominable Caveman as a huge, hairy man who leapt from rock to rock swinging a mighty club. He was never seen during the day, but at night he roamed the island, howling and snarling. At dawn he disappeared into one of the count, less caves that honeycombed the rocks. What was this

creature? Was it man or beast? That was what Donald decided to find out.

Landing at the island was a tricky business. There was no question of

landing on the island ; it was much too dangerous. Even the sandy area near the sea was hopeless because it was pitted with the burrows which penguins call their nests, and dotted with other big seabirds. We had to be careful of birds on the wing, too; the air was thick with them. Some of them were pretty hefty birds, and an aircraft colliding with one of them would come off badly. There was an ugly swell running, even in the alleged harbour, but as this rarely stops, even in fair weather, we had to risk landing on it. However, Biggles managed to get the Wanderer down on the water, after which, not without difficulty, we taxied on to a shelving stretch of beach, and anchored the machine to the ground with ropes and sandbags.

Then we set out to explore. Naturally, we were armed—that is, all except Donald. He still wore his top hat and frock coat, and carried a camera. He had a crazy idea that we might be able to capture the Abominable Caveman alive, but failing that a photograph would have to do.

Picking our way between the nesting birds, we made for the village. I mention this picking our way because the penguins would not move for us, and if you got too close you were liable to get a dagger in your foot—the dagger being a penguin's beak. Apart from penguins and sea-birds, we saw a few seals on the beach, but nothing else.

The village was a melancholy looking place, grass-grown, windows-out, doors flapping in the wind. I'm not soft, but there's something sad about an abandoned human habitation. Nor am I superstitious, but I could imagine the ghosts of the old Portuguese settlers haunting the little houses they built with so much labour. In the churchyard, among the mouldering wooden crosses, we found the first confirmation of the caveman story. The bodies had been buried in shallow earth on account of the bethock; now bones and skulls lay scattered about. It wasn't a pretty sight, and I don't mind admitting it gave me the willies. Biggles had a look round ; he said nothing, but I could see that he had got his thinking cap on.

" Well, I think that's all there is to see here," he said at last. " Let's work round the outside of the island."

For a long time we saw nothing unusual. An old man seal came at me, all teeth and hair; he looked a dangerous customer, and if we hadn't been warned by the Government officials at Capetown, when we got our permit to explore the island, that the island was a seal sanctuary, I should have put a bullet through him. As it was I had to bolt.

Then, rounding a shoulder of rock, we came upon a Cove with a little shelving beach.

With one accord we stopped dead, staring. You never saw such a sight in your life as met our gaze. The place was a shambles. Blood was everywhere. There was blood on the sand and blood on the rocks; even the water at the edge of the sea was crimson. Talk about a battlefield ! But there were no bodies, dead or alive. The only living creatures in sight were sharks in the sea, and there were plenty of them. Nasty-looking triangular dorsal fins were cutting through the water in all directions—scores of them; and I don't wonder at it.

"Nice place for a bathe," remarked Biggles, looking at the seething water.

"Nice place for a picnic," sneered Algy.

Dear me, whatever has been going on?" said Donald seriously, looking a bit pale about the gills. " This is really terrible."

"It looks as if the Abominable Caveman has been behaving abominably," said Biggles. "

It rather looks, too, as if there are several of them. I can't imagine one man making such a mess."

With that Biggles stooped down, dipped his fingers in the blood and smelt it. He didn't say anything. Neither did we. There didn't seem to be anything to say. Had it been left to me I should have been in the air, homeward bound, in five minutes. Evidently this caveman was something to be reckoned with, and as far as I was concerned somebody else could do the reckoning.

Biggles led the way back to the Wanderer. I could see he was doing a powerful lot of thinking. By the time we got to the machine it was beginning to grow dark.

"Let's get her on the water," said Biggles.

"That sounds a good idea to me," I declared. "You won't be going," announced Biggles.

"What do you mean?" I asked, not a little shaken.

Biggles took Algy on one side and had a quiet conversation with him. Algy nodded.

Then they came back.

"Algy is flying down to Capetown right away," said Biggles. "The rest of us are going to stay here."

"I demand an explanation!" cried Donald, looking a bit upset.

"As you're paying for the trip, you're entitled to one," Biggles told him. "My object is to produce the Abominable Caveman—that's why we came here. Something, or somebody—I don't know who or what, although I have an idea—I say, something is on this island, and as we arrived with a certain amount of unavoidable noise, the creature must know perfectly well that we are here. It's quite likely that he's been watching us from one of the caves. When he sees the aircraft leave he'll think we've all gone and emerge from his lair—at least, that's what I hope. Algy will return in the morning to pick us up."

"Excellent!" cried Donald, who was afraid of nothing.

Well, we got the Wanderer on the water and Algy departed for Capetown. We lay low among the rocks until it was dark, and then, very quietly, made our way to the deserted village. We parked ourselves in a room with a window on each side and settled down to wait. It was an eerie business, with the churchyard so close, and bones and things scattered about. It was pretty dark at first although the sky was clear; then the moon, which was nearly full, came up, and made the place nearly as light as day. It must have been about twelve o'clock when I felt Biggles stiffen.

"There he is," he breathed.

We looked, and there, sure enough, silhouetted against the skyline, standing quite still, was a huge, hairy figure, holding in its hand an enormous club.

"Let's go and grab him," whispered the Doctor.

"Certainly not," replied Biggles. "He'd knock our brains out with one sweep of that club; yet if we shot him we might be held on a charge of murder."

Presently the figure began to move off along the ridge, and shortly afterwards we lost sight of it.

"There, now we've lost him," whispered the Doctor.

"Follow me, but don't make a sound," ordered Biggles, and leaving the house he began creeping like an Indian towards the ridge over which the caveman had disappeared. It was slow work. Beyond the ridge was another, another and another. We had to go slowly because we didn't want to bump into the blighter, and I suppose it must have taken us the best part of three hours to get to the last ridge, by which time we were at the extreme southern tip of the island. At this point there were cliffs about eighty feet high, and below, a narrow strip of sand. We looked down, but jumped back when we saw a light.

" Ah ! He understands fire," whispered Donald.

"He understands more than that," said Biggles softly. "We'll wait for daylight before we move—it won't be long."

Well, we squatted among the rocks behind the edge of the cliff until it got light, and then we looked down again. For some minutes I had thought, or imagined, that I could hear voices, and as soon as I looked down I saw that I hadn't been mistaken. There were seven men on the narrow strip of beach. About fifty yards away, in a little cove, rode a sailing dinghy. Biggles didn't seem in the least surprised.

Something was certainly going on, but I'm dashed if I could see what it was. The men seemed to be carrying out from a cave great bundles of sloppy stuff; and piling them in a heap.

"Who are these men?" whispered Donald.

Biggles looked at him with a funny little smile on his face.

Skin poachers," he

answered.

"You mean those bundles are skins?" gasped Donald.

"Yes. Sealskins worth a small fortune. You haven't forgotten that this is a seal sanctuary, or that it belongs to the South African Government? The men have evidently come over here from Wreck Island, or from the mainland. The Abominable Caveman's job was to frighten the natives away. I suspected What was going on as soon as I saw all that blood.

That's where the seals were massacred, clubbed to death. You see, if you shoot a seal you make a hole in the pelt and ruin it. The carcasses

were flung into the sea—hence the sharks. Stay where you are."

Without saying what he was going to do, Biggles went off, and presently I saw him going down the cliff at a place where it was not too difficult, and where he couldn't be seen by the men on the beach. He went straight to

the dinghy, picked up a rock, and smashed it through the floorboards. It sank immediately. Then he came back

to us.

"That's queered their little game," he announced with satisfaction. "They're prisoners on the island now."

"And what about us?" I asked.

"You'll see," was all Biggles would tell me.

Well, after a little while the men began carrying the bundles of blood-stained skins along to the dinghy—or rather, to the place where the dinghy had been. When they found it was no longer there, my word ! What a fuss they kicked up ! The painter was still made fast to a rock, so by hauling on it they were able to pull the dinghy up. When they saw the hole knocked through the bottom—that did it. They must have known then that they weren't alone on the island, and one of them, happening to look up, spotted us looking down. He gave the alarm. Drawing revolvers, the whole gang started after us.

We retreated to the next ridge and held them off with our rifles until eleven o'clock, when the Wanderer came back, bringing not only Algy but four police officers, all armed. That was too much for the smugglers and they tried to bolt—not that they could have got away, anyhow. But they were cut off by a posse of sailors who, unknown to us, and to them, had landed farther down.

It turned out afterwards that the officer in Capetown to whom Algy had reported had radioed a coastal patrol boat to make for the island and do any cleaning up that was necessary.

Well, that's really all there was to it. The men were arrested, caught red-handed—

literally, for the bloodstained pelts were still on the beach. One of them turned King's evidence. He declared that the whaling station on the next island was only a blind. The gang had been raiding the seal

island regularly for nearly two years. No wonder we didn't see many seals ! The gang had made a lot of money, and if they'd had the sense to stop, or if Donald's curiosity hadn't taken us to the spot, they'd have got away with it. As it was they got long terms of imprisonment.

They'd made their plans carefully. Of course, they couldn't start operations while the Hottentots were living on the island, so they hit upon the scheme of frightening them away—not a difficult matter—with this Abominable Caveman nonsense. The caveman, of course, was one of the gang, a big negro with two or three goat skins tied round him.

The imaginations of the Hottentots did the rest, although the fellow admitted that to lend colour to his masquerade he had uncovered some of the graves and flung the bones about. During the daytime there was no difficulty about finding a hiding place in the caves. In fact, an army might have looked for him for months without finding him.

Poor old Donald was bitterly disappointed that there was no real caveman, that the whole thing had turned out to be a fraud, but it was some consolation to get a letter from the South African Government, thanking us for putting an end to the career of the abominable apparition. The Hottentots are back again now.

Ginger glanced at the clock. "Great Scott ! " he ejaculated. "It's time we were on parade."

III

THE ADVENTURE OF THE HORTICULTURAL

HERMITS

THE officers of No. 666 (Fighter) Squadron squatted outside the camouflaged hangar of

A" Flight, waiting for the morning mist to lift.

"It's hanging about a long time," remarked Angus Mackail, peering into the grey vapour that enveloped the aerodrome.

"I wish it would either go up or 'come down," snorted Tug Carrington. "I'm getting fed up sitting around looking at nothing. Hey, Ginger, how about telling us another tale to pass the time—you know, about that funny old fossil, Dr. Duck ? "

"You mean Donald," smiled Ginger.

"You said he hired you regularly, so you must have made several trips."

Ginger nodded reminiscently. "As a matter of fact, he came to see us the very day after we got back from Labyrinth Island. He had had another brain-wave. We were to start right away on a sort of glorified tour, checking up on all the queer things nobody had ever properly investigated. The snag was, most of the places were off the map. On the other hand, it was this very fact that made them exciting, although Biggles, who had to do most of the flying, swore that these jungle trips made an old man of him."

"One more and I should have had grey hair," put in Biggles, who was sitting on an empty oil-drum. He laughed suddenly. "Tell them about the Horticultural Hermits, Ginger," he suggested.

Lord Bertie Lissie nearly dropped his eyeglass. "The what?" he gasped.

"The Horticultural Hermits, otherwise the Balmy Botanists," answered Ginger. "But I'll tell you the tale then you can call them what you like." And this is the story he told : You may remember reading in the papers, not very long ago, of the death of an explorer named Wedson — Bertram Wedson. He died in a lunatic asylum, of a disease no doctor could diagnose. Apparently a sort of fungus into on his head, and the roots eventually pene- trated his brain. Everyone thought he was mad—and, indeed, he may have been at the finish. But one man believed his story, and that was Dr. Augustus Duck, otherwise Donald. It was he who told us about it.

According to Wedson, tucked away in a valley on the eastern slope of the Andes there dwelt a strange tribe of white men. The original members were Jesuits who had fled from the wrath of the King of Spain rather than give up some gold they had discovered. They disappeared into the mountains and no one ever saw them again. It was assumed that they had been killed by Indians or died of disease. But this, apparently, was not the case.

They got lost in a desert, and in the desert there was a plateau. On this plateau they built a monastery and settled down for life. This, by the way, happened about three hundred years ago.

As you probably know, right through the ages the cleverest cultivators have been monks.

Years ago they grew medicinal herbs, and generally improved fruit, vegetables and flowers. They discovered grafting, hybridization, and things like that. I don't know much about it myself—this is what Donald told us. Well, according to Wedson, this particular party of monks, possibly because they had nothing else to do, had gone farther in the gardening business than anyone else had ever thought of going. They had discovered the most amazing things. They had all the vitamins labelled long before European doctors realized that there were such things. By taking these in certain proportions they could arrest the advance of age, or, conversely, expedite it. Mind you, I'm not saying that I believe this. I'm just telling you what Wedson told Donald.

It seems that Wedson had been prospecting for gold in the Andes, and was trying to reach the Amazon when he came upon the desert. There was nothing remarkable about it except that the cacti were extraordinary

both in shape and size. He spotted the plateau. There was nothing singular about that, either, because if you care to read books on the subject you'll learn that this formation is common in South America, due to the subsidence of the land at some time in the remote past. That is to say, the soft earth sank, or was washed away by rain leaving the rocks sticking up, like islands in the sea. rain, of course, had native porters carrying his kit.

There had been some uneasy muttering among them when he had started to cross the desert, but the moment he announced that he was going to survey the plateau for gold-bearing quartz, they dropped their loads and fled. They never came back. For Wedson this was a serious matter, but he was not the sort of man to let a bunch of natives stop him from doing what he wanted to do. So up the plateau he went. Bear in mind that he knew nothing about the lost Jesuits at this time.

He didn't get far before he was grabbed by a party of the most amazing men he'd ever seen. They were white—not ordinary white, but dead white. Their skins were like snow, and this, they afterwards told him, was due to a special vegetarian diet. Well, they took him to the top of the plateau, where he caused a bit of a sensation. The poor chap tried them in all the languages he knew, and ultimately managed to strike the right one. His captors spoke a queer old form of Spanish. Presently a sort of high priest arrived.

Wedson was put on a table and his skin was scratched with a thorn.

The instant the point pierced his flesh he fainted—or at any rate, he lost consciousness. When he came round the priest told him that he was a prisoner on the plateau for life. He could depart if he wished, but if he went away he would die most horribly because a seed had been planted under his skin, and the only thing that would prevent it from germinating, or growing, was a special fruit lotion obtainable only on the plateau. In other words, if poor Wedson couldn't get the fruit juice the seed would grow and kill him.

So he stayed. He was on the plateau, he reckoned, for a year. He had no complaint to make about the way the people treated him, and for a time he amused himself by examining the extraordinary plants that grew, or had been developed by the people on the plateau. Then he got fed up, and decided that he might as well be dead as go on living as he was. He thought perhaps the seed story was a bluff to frighten him into staying; or maybe the seed wouldn't germinate after all. Anyway, to make a long story short, he bolted, and after suffering incredible hardships got to the coast, where he took ship for England.

Before he landed he knew that the seed had germinated. It was in his head. He could feel it burning under his skull. He went to doctors, to specialists, but they could do nothing for him. Upon this he decided to go back to the plateau as the only means of saving his life, but before he could start he was clapped into a mental home. As a result of telling the doctors the story of the delayed-action seed they decided that his sufferings in the jungle had turned his brain. They put him in an asylum. Unable to get back to the plateau, the poor fellow died.

What I have told you so far is what Wedson told Donald, up to the point of his death.

Donald could do nothing about it at the time, but now that he had discovered that an aeroplane will take you a long way in a short time, in reasonable comfort and safety, nothing would satisfy him but that he must go and have a look at the plateau—or rather, the people on it. He wanted to see these weird and wonderful plants. Also, he said, he was anxious to study the mental development of white men who had never heard of such things as engines, radio, telephones, and all the rest of the clutter which we call civilization.

Well, we went. Frankly, although Biggles said he had an open mind about it, I don't think any of us really believed Wedson's stories about the horrific plants. Still, we were all interested. For my own part, if I was afraid of anything, it was that the whole thing might turn out to

be a flop. In that case, Donald pointed out, we should at least prove that the doctors were right in declaring Wedson insane.

i

There s no need for me to go into all the details of how we got to the desert. It wasn't an easy trip, for not knowing how long we should be away we were loaded down with stores and all the gubbms Donald insisted on taking with him on his travels. How he stood the heat in a top hat and frock coat I don't know. Wedson had given him the position of the desert, and •

from the air we could see it long before we reached it. And there sticking up in the middle of it, just as Wedson had described, was the plateau, its base buried in a belt of the greenest jungle you ever saw in your life. I shall never forget the colour of that jungle belt. It was dazzling, vivid, poisonous green.

We flew low over the plateau, and, sure enough, there was a little town with a sort of temple in the middle. That settled it. Part, if not all, of Wedson's story was true. All that remained for us to do was to check up on the horticultural side of it.

We found a place to land in the desert, on the sand, close against the green belt, through which, according to Wedson, a path went up to the top of the plateau. We couldn't see the path from the air. In fact, I couldn't imagine how we were going to get to the top, for the sides of the plateau were pretty nearly sheer. There was no question of landing on the plateau itself, for where there were no houses the land was under cultivation.

As soon as we were out of the machine I started thinking about that seed which had been planted in Wedson's head, for if the plants which we could now see were anything to judge by, his story was true. You never saw such growths in your life, and Donald, pale with excitement, soon had his notebook out. As a matter of detail, this was only a beginning. So far we had seen only the cacti, which seemed to form a sort of advance guard to the main belt of vegetation. There are many sorts of cacti, some of them pretty big, and while the flowers may be gorgeous colours, the growths themselves are not what you could call beautiful. Many of them are monstrous, bloated masses of fleshy substance. Nearly all of them are covered with needle-like spines. But I'm sure nobody had ever seen anything like these particular specimens. They were enormous. They were fantastic. Some were like huge barrels; some stood in rows of fluted columns; some

had no shape at all—just great unwieldy masses of greenstuff, like pre-historic monsters.

They were all spiny. I don't mean ordinary prickles. I mean needles two feet long. Some threw out trailers, like brambles, but instead of thorns they had on them bunches of spikes like glorified barbed wire.

I had started to walk towards the green belt when Donald came racing after me.

"Take care ! " he shouted. "Where do you think you're going?"

I said I was going to look at the green belt, whereupon he pointed at the ground, just in front, and I saw something that I hadn't previously noticed. It was a barri- cade of spikes.

I don't know if you've ever seen that stuff that grows in Mexico called Spanish Bayonet?

It's really a leaf, but it looks like a dagger, and feels like a dagger-and is one, in fact. It will pierce leather as though it were tissue paper. If you accidentally put your foot on one of these fiendish spikes you get a painful wound that may take months to heal. Well, this stuff was like Spanish Bayonet, only worse. It grew in a twenty foot wide band all round the bottom of the plateau. Looking at it, I realized that it was no accident. It had been planted there. Donald told us that Wedson had warned him about it.

But," I said, "only a tank could get through that stuff."

He agreed, but said there was a path through it, if only we could find it.

It took some time to find because it was very narrow, and didn't run straight. It zigzagged all over the place. Of all the military contrivances I've ever seen, that was the best.

Without tanks, no army could cross this belt of bayonets. You see, no matter how many men there were, they would have to advance in single file.

Biggles had a few things to say about it.

"You know," he said, "these people have developed a first line of defence that no civilized nation seems to

have thought of. This stuff would stop troops more effectively than machine guns." Then Donald had a word to say. Turning to Biggles he remarked, "When you said first line of defence you may not have meant it literally, but that is what it is. The green jungle behind it must be the nettles."

Then he told us that Wedson had mentioned stinging nettles—not ordinary ones, but huge brutes, so poisonous that one sting was enough to make a man die in agony. The people up above had been three hundred years perfecting it. He pointed out that all the energy civilized nations had put into mechanical devices, had been directed by these people to botany and horticulture.

"Just a minute," said Biggles. "Are there any more horrors? If there are you'd better tell us about them."

"Yes," answered Donald. "There are the poppies. Wedson called them the poppies of death. Their colour is a rich glowing gold—and unless I am mistaken I see a flash of gold in the jungle."

I started to back away. "How do they kill you?" I asked.

"From the description Wedson gave, these poppies must be a cross between the opium poppy and the sensitive plant. As you may know, the drug opium is derived from the seed vessel of the opium poppy. If you scratch one a milky juice exudes. That, when dry, is opium. Otherwise the plant is harmless. The sensitive plant responds instantly to the slightest vibration. It quivers, recoils, or collapses. By crossing the two plants, these wonderful people have so arranged it that the slightest vibration causes the poppies to fill the air with fragrance. That fragrance is a gas, and once you fall under its influence you sleep—and never wake up. Mind you, Wedson only told me of the existence of the poppies, and their deadly properties. The rest is supposition, not an unreasonable explanation, I hope."

Biggles said, sarcastically, "I'm glad you mentioned it, Doctor. Unless we all wish to commit suicide—and I certainly do not—there would appear to be no point in going on. I suggest that we all return to the machine, have some supper and a good night's sleep, and try to get in touch with these people in the morning. It will soon be dark, anyway. If we can make them understand that we wish them no harm, that our interest is purely scientific, they may show us round their botanical gardens. If they grow this sort of stuff on the outside, the gardens inside should be fascinating." The Doctor agreed.

Well, we had a stroll round the outside of the dagger belt, looking up at the rim of the plateau, but there was no sign of life. Actually, the people must have been watching us all the time, as we were to discover later on. We had a council of war over supper, and then went to bed. When I say bed, I mean we unrolled our blankets on the warm sand under the wings of the aircraft and went to sleep. Naturally, we kept watch. Algy took the first spell, from eight until twelve.

Just before midnight he woke us up and said he had an uncomfortable feeling that something was going on, but he couldn't make out what it was. When Biggles questioned him, he admitted that the only sound he had heard was a pattering noise, like hail—which was absurd, because the sky was clear. Biggles said he was suffering from nerves. Algy denied it, and swore something had hit him on the nose. We had a look round, but everything was the same as when we had gone to bed—or appeared to be.

Biggles took the second spell of four hours, and then woke me up to take my turn. He had nothing to report. He had neither seen or heard anything. So he curled up under the wing and I carried on. An hour passed, and nothing happened. You know how it is on these night watches. I walked up and down for a long time, but eventually squatted on one of the wheels of the machine.

It was just before dawn that I first heard the rustling sound. It was no more than a faint whisper, as when a light breeze moves the leaves of a tree. The funny part was, the sound seemed to come from all directions at once. Then something wriggled under my foot, and looking down I saw a little thing like a worm coming out of the ground. In fact, I thought it was a worm..

It didn't alarm me in the least. Not for a moment did I connect it with the people on the plateau.

Then, looking round, in the faint light that was now coming from the east, I saw that it wasn't a matter of one worm, but thousands. They were coming up everywhere, all round the machine. Bending down to have a look at the nearest one, I saw something that made me wonder for a minute if I were dreaming. The thing wasn't a worm at all. It was a plant, a tiny runner, with two little leaves on the tip. Even as I watched, it threw out two little side shoots.

As you probably know, in the tropics certain plants grow at amazing speed. I remember seeing one—in Malaya it was—that grew at the rate of two feet a day. You could almost watch it grow. But these

plants round the Wanderer sprouted in front of your eyes, twisting and turning as they came out of the ground, more like reptiles than vegetables.

If you don't believe me I can't blame you. I couldn't believe it myself, although I saw it happening.

For a minute I just sat and stared like a fool, and by that time some of these infernal weeds were two or three feet long. Some were climbing over the machine, like scarlet runners gone crazy. If you can imagine a scarlet runner growing at the rate of six inches a minute you'll have a pretty good idea of what this stuff was like. Then, in a flash, I understood. The pattering noise Algy had heard were seeds being thrown down by the plant experts up above. They had germinated within a few hours of touching the ground, and were now growing at lightning speed. In a few more minutes they would be all over the aircraft, anchoring it to the ground. There would be no runway to take off.

I let out a yell that brought the others to their feet with a rush. It was now fairly light, and it was possible to see that the desert in the region of the aircraft was a desert no longer.

You couldn't see the ground for this purple weed. It was everywhere.

Following Biggles's example, we all fell on the stuff in a sort of fury, dragging it out of the ground by the roots, and tearing it off the machine with our hands, but we might as well have tried to stop a tide. Biggles must have realized the futility of it, for he suddenly yelled, "Get aboard everybody—it's our only chance!"

The next couple of minutes were sheer pandemonium. We made a rush for the machine. I tripped over the stuff and hit the ground with a bang. Before I could get up the creepers were twining themselves round me. I tore them out by the roots, and reached the machine with garlands round my neck, like an ancient Greek hero. Somehow we all managed to get aboard. By the time Biggles had got the engine started there were forty or fifty runners crawling over the machine; but it turned out that they were no tougher than any other weed, and they couldn't stand the strain of a five hundred horsepower engine when Biggles opened the throttle. There was no time to warm up the engine. We tore across the sea of weed in a sort of purple spray as our bows, wheels, and airscrew cut into the stuff and whirled it into the air. Bits of it were still hanging on long after we had taken off.

From up topsides we had a final look at the plateau. It looked as though the whole population had lined up on the brink to see the end of us. They didn't quite manage that, but it was touch and go. Still, if their idea is to preserve themselves from outside interference, I should say they have succeeded. At any rate, we gave them best, and went home. I expect they're still there.

Biggles stood up. "And as far as I am concerned, they can stay there," he observed. "

Come on, chaps, the fog's lifting. Let's get into the air."

IV

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CROONING

CROCODILE

FLYING-OFFICER GINGER HEBBLETHWAITE, in bathing

shorts, lay on the soft turf that fringed the river bank and stretched luxuriously as the sun warmed his bare back.

Most of the officers of his squadron were there, for the squadron had moved into reserve for a short spell of rest. It happened that the reserve aerodrome was bounded on one side by a river, so, as the day was hot and the sun bright, the temptation to bathe was not to be resisted. From the distance came the vibrant roar of an engine being run up, as the fitters and riggers toiled at their tasks of overhauling the squadron's Spitfires.

"Say, kid, you weren't in the water long," remarked Tex O'Hara to Ginger.

"No," agreed Ginger, "I wasn't. I don't enjoy bathing in fresh water as much as I used to."

"Really? Why not—if you see what I mean?" inquired Lord Bertie Lissie, joining the party.

"Because," answered Ginger slowly, "just as I am beginning to enjoy myself a piece of weed or something touches my leg, and I think of crocodiles. Ever had a crocodile make a grab at you leg, Bertie?"

"No, by Jove. Absolutely no. Nasty feeling though, I should say."

"Very nasty," confirmed Ginger warmly. "Horrible, in fact.

Tug Carrington chipped in. "Did one make a grab at you, Ginger ? "

"It certainly did. And, what's more, it got me."

"Got you ? " cried Henry Harcourt incredulously.

There was a shout of laughter, and a few jeers.

"Yes, he got me," declared Ginger seriously. "But then, you must understand, this was no ordinary crocodile. This crocodile talked. It was, in fact, the Crooning Crocodile of Congawonga."

"This sounds," put in Angus Mackail shrewdly, "like another of your adventures with dare-devil Donald." "Quite right, it was," agreed Ginger.

Cries of " tell us about it" and " shoot " came from several directions.

Ginger rolled over on to his back to give his chest a sun-bath, and this is the story he told : As I believe I mentioned some time ago, our biologist client, Dr. Augustus Duck, had spent most of his life collecting information concerning the rare, remarkable, and, we might say, the unbelievable. In all his crazy collection I doubt if there was anything more fantastic than his notes on the Crooning Croc. of Congawonga. Yet nothing was better authenticated, for it had been seen, and heard, by no fewer than three people, all reliable witnesses. The first was Major Kilton, a British political officer in Central Africa. British political officers don't tell lies. Apparently there were some funny rumours circulating on the border of the district for which he was responsible, so he went off to find out what they were all about. He never came back. Later on a story trickled in that he had been eaten by cannibals. A search party went out, but all they found were his boots, a few buttons, and a tin case containing his papers. Among the papers was a diary, and in the diary was the first report about the Crooning Croc. The second man was Monsieur Bou-lenger, of the Belgian Missionary Society. He got back to the coast, where he died of fever, babbling in his delirium about the talking crocodile of Congawonga. The third man was a newspaper reporter named Davis, sent out by a London paper to get the inside story of the Musical Masterpiece—as people were beginning to call this particular crocodile. He saw it and he heard it; but the natives saw him, too, and he only just escaped with his life. When he wrote his story the whole world rocked with laughter, whereupon, unable to face the ridicule, he retired. Or else the paper gave him the sack for telling lies—I don't

know which. His trouble was that he had only got his unsubstantiated word for what he wrote. There was no evidence. Donald decided that it was high time somebody settled the matter once and for all. So, armed with rifles, and a few other things which we thought would be useful, including a good camera, we went off to locate, and if possible capture, the Vocal Wonder of Congawonga.

From the information available, Congawonga was a native village built on the fringe of a small lake which was really an overflow from one of the upper tributaries of the Congo River. There was some doubt as to whether the place was in the Belgian Congo, French Equatorial Africa,

or British Sudan. Donald was inclined to think it was in the Sudan, because it was known that crocodile-worship was a favourite cult with the inhabitants. Incidentally, some of these crocs that have been set up as gods have the reputation of being hundreds of years old. Not that this mattered to us.

We reckoned that all we had to fear were the local lads of the village, who, according to report, had healthy appetites—or perhaps I'd better say unhealthy appetites—for human joints. We kept open minds about the old crocodile himself, but we felt that we should be able to make him sing a different tune when the time came. We kept our trip secret so that there should be no reception party waiting for us when we arrived—it's surprising how soon word gets round Africa when strangers are in the jungle.

Well, we went off in the old Wanderer, and soon established an advanced base on the river. After cruising around for three days we found the lake we were looking for—or what we took to be the lake. As it turned out, it happened to be the right one. Of course, we didn't land on it. That would have been a bit too much like jumping straight into the lion's den—or rather, the crocodile's pen. We came down on the river about four miles away, and anchoring in mid-stream, unpacked the collapsible canoe which we had brought with us. That same night, loaded with all the equipment we thought we should be likely to require, we set off for the village of Congawonga. We had no plan. How could we make one? We just paddled along, keeping near the bank, on what was really a scouting expedition. Biggles said he would decide what to do when we saw more clearly how the land lay.

We hadn't much information to go on. According to Major Kilton's diary, the croc didn't live in the actual lagoon, although no doubt it had been born there; but on account of its vocal talent a special pond

had been built for it a short distance from the village. On one side of the pond was a little temple in which the creature passed its spare time. It was fed every night. Knowing this, every night it would appear on the slipway that led from the temple to the pond, and say what it would like for its dinner. The high priest whose job it was to collect this information would then send word back to the village. The natives would collect what was required, and dump it on the slipway, after which the croc, with a song of thanks, would carry the stuff into its lair to be devoured at leisure. Sometimes a few selected spectators were allowed to watch the performance.

That was all we knew—except, of course, the natives thought the world of their pet.

They were most particular who went near it, so outsiders like ourselves, if caught in the act, might expect to be shown the sharp end of a spear preparatory to being flung to the croc.

We got to the outskirts of the village without trouble. So far everything had been comparatively simple. The difficult part of the programme now lay before us. The snag was, we didn't know on which side of the village the pond was situated. Obviously, we couldn't use the river any longer because we should have been spotted, so we went quietly ashore, Donald carrying the camera and a flashlight apparatus. The rest of us were armed with rifles, shot-guns or pistols, according to taste. Biggles had a couple of hand-grenades in his pocket—just in case. I may mention that Algy carried a double-barrelled gun loaded with buckshot; he reckoned that the spread of the shot would make it a handier weapon in the dark if we ran into trouble. Naturally, we didn't want to kill anybody, because apart from humanitarian reasons, this might have got us into serious trouble with the authorities. All we wanted was a peep at the articulating alligator, this wizardly lizard—or whatever it was.

"I think our best plan is to wait here until feeding time," decided Biggles. "Then we may get a clue to the whereabouts of the pool."

So we waited. We waited about half an hour, and then, sure enough, we heard the most amazing sound you could possibly imagine. It was a deep, throaty warble. And presently, as we listened, the sound broke into definite words.

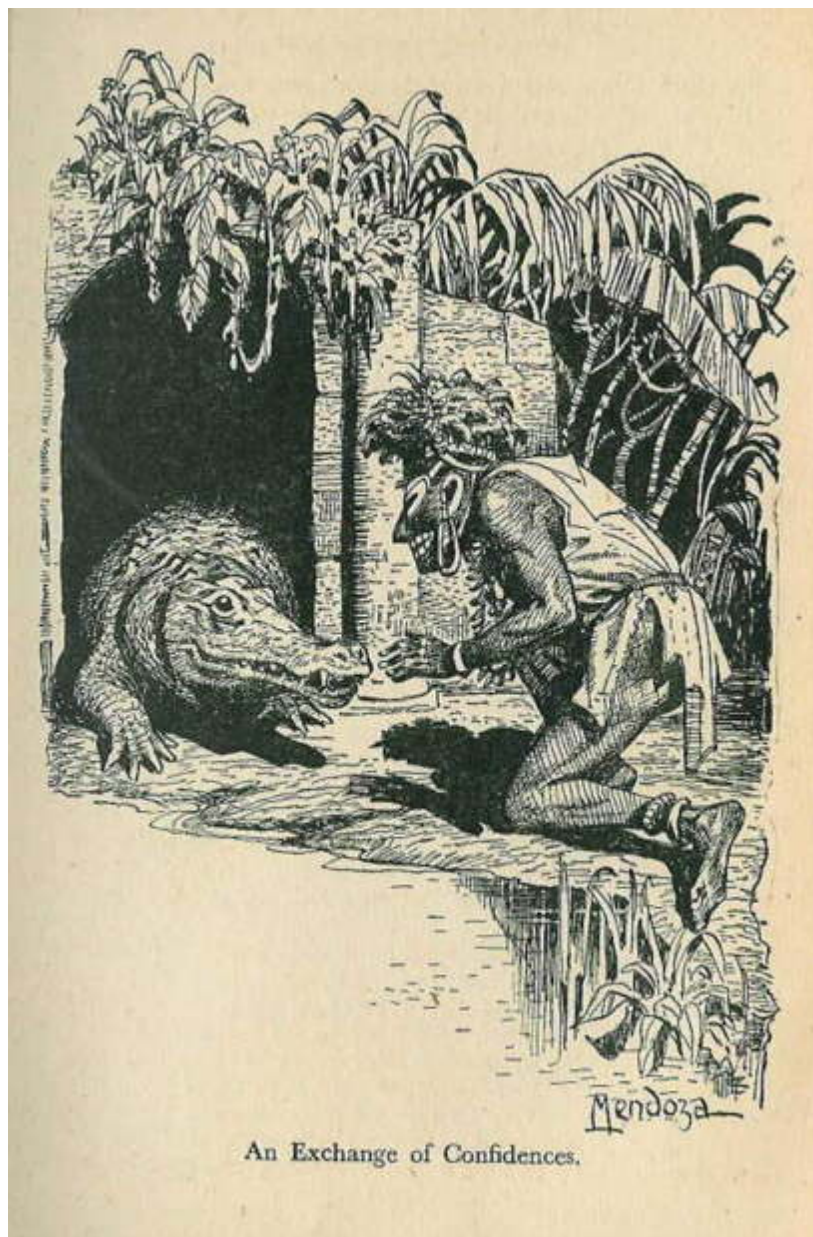
"It's talking," gasped Donald. "What's it *saying ? " "I don't know," answered Biggles. "

They didn't teach crocodile language at my school."

"It doesn't seem possible," muttered Donald.

"It isn't," answered Biggles grimly. "Let's get nearer."

We started making our way towards the sound, and after about ten minutes we came in



An Exchange of Confidences.

sight of what was evidently the temple—quite a small affair with a pillared entrance. It was only sun-baked mud, whitewashed, but in the moonlight it looked like marble—most impressive. In front was the pool, round, about thirty yards in diameter, with a stone edge—not unlike a good sized lily-pool such as you sometimes see in gardens.

Connecting the temple and the pool was a sort of stone slipway.

Just emerging, half in and half out of the temple, was the croc. Its mouth was opening and shutting, and there was no doubt whatever that it was making the noise. I must confess it shook me more than a little. On the stone edge of the pond, on his knees, bowing and scraping, was a figure all done up in rags, feathers, and a mask. You must all have seen pictures of an African witch-doctor, so there's no need for me to describe him in detail, but he wasn't pretty to look at. It was obvious that he was the high priest, going through the nightly ritual. A bunch of spear-armed natives crouched behind him, fairly shaking with terror—and I don't wonder at it.

The high priest said something to the croc, and it answered. And as it answered the poor blessed natives set up the most terrible groaning.

"What do you make of it?" I asked Biggles.

"I don't know," he answered. "Presently I propose to ask this rollicking reptile a few questions myself. Then we may learn something. Meanwhile, we'll watch."

The croc came on down the slipway, and I must say it was an enormous brute—not far short of thirty feet long. The high priest made a short speech to the natives. They dashed off and presently came back with a load of stuff which they threw on the slipway. We couldn't see what it was. It looked like bundles of something. I assumed they were hunks of meat. The croc picked them up one by one in its jaws and swallowed them whole. In broad daylight that may sound a simple, even a silly, performance, but out there in the African jungle there was nothing funny about it, believe me. It was horrible to watch.

Well, after the meal had all been consumed the croc sang a sort of chant. The high priest and his assistants, after more bowing and scraping, retired, backwards, as if they were taking leave of royalty. We waited for a bit, and as soon as they were out of earshot we moved forward.

The croc had just started to turn back into its temple, but when it saw us it stopped, and crouched. For a minute or two there we stood, looking at it, while it crouched, glaring at us. Then it gave a frightful bellow and made a rush down the slipway as though it intended attacking us. Algy levelled his gun, but Biggles knocked it aside. "Don't shoot,"

he said quickly. At the same moment there was a terrific flash of light that nearly blinded me.

What happened exactly I don't know. It seems that the flash was caused by the Doctor, who had rushed up to take a flashlight photograph. What with this, and Biggles pushing Algy's gun aside, and me being blinded by the light, I fell into the pool. I came up gasping, for it was deep. Also, I may say that the water stank like nothing on earth. But I wasn't concerned with that, for the croc, with a bellow, was after me. I made for the bank, but I wasn't quick enough, and the brute's jaws closed over my leg.

I've had some unpleasant moments in my life, but that, definitely, was the worst. I yelled and I kicked. The croc roared in its throat—without opening its jaws. The trouble was, those on the bank daren't shoot for fear of hitting me. Then Algy got a chance and let drive at the brute's tail. That made it let go, and it went scrambling up the slipway—with Biggles after it.

I thought he must have gone stark, staring, raving mad when I saw him actually follow it into the temple. Then, from inside, came the most fearful noise. It sounded like the croc tearing Biggles to pieces. In fact, that's what we all thought it was, and we made a rush for the back door—or where it should be if there was one. I found I could run, which surprised me, for I felt sure that my leg had gone. But it was still there, and it seemed to be all right. I couldn't understand it—but I hadn't time to work out the problem then.

We soon had the temple door down. The Doctor switched on an electric torch, and before us was the most amazing sight you ever saw in your life. Instead of the croc tearing Biggles to pieces, it was the other way round. He had torn the skin off the croc ! And what do you think he pulled out of it? A white man. Actually, we discovered later that he wasn't really white, but a half-caste. To make the situation even more incongruous, the fellow addressed us in English, with a broad American accent. I say he addressed us, but really he was bleating like a great kid. He implored us not to let the natives see him or they'd tear him to pieces.

By this time we all had a pretty good idea of what had been going on. This fellow, who was half educated, had thought out a racket to enrich himself at the expense of his more ignorant brethren. The food, so called, with which he had just been fed, lay about the floor. It was rubber, palm-nut kernels, and other marketable commodities. There was even a little gold-dust.

It turned out later that the witch-doctor had stood in with him for a share of the profits.

With an old crocodile hide, in which the half-breed took his place every night, it had been an easy matter to prey on the minds of the credulous natives, who were given to understand that if they failed to appease the crocodile god, dire calamities would befall.

Meanwhile, it looked as if we were going to be the victims of a calamity, for the natives, who must have heard the uproar, started arriving in force; and they brought their spears with them. Some carried torches. When they saw us they began yelping like dogs.

Unfortunately, they were between us and our canoe. Biggles held his hands up and shouted to them to stop yelling, but his voice was lost in the din as the natives started a sort of stamping dance, crouching, all very intimidating.

Biggles said, "They'll charge any minute if we don't do something to stop them. I've got it ! Give me a hand, somebody."

I went with him, and we hauled out the hide—the hide of the Crooning Croc of Congawonga. As soon as the natives saw it they stopped dead, as if they'd all been stricken with paralysis. The silence was even more ominous than the noise. But it gave Biggles a chance to make himself heard.

"Who speaks English ? " he shouted. "I want a man who talks English."

A grey-haired old warrior stepped forward. His idea of English wouldn't have passed at the B.B.C., but it was better than nothing. It transpired that he had once made a trip to the coast, where he had picked up a bit of pidgin English. Biggles told him to tell the chief that the crocodile god was a fraud, that there had been a man inside it all the time to swindle them out of their rubber and stuff. In short, he spilt the beans, as they say, whereupon the witch-doctor started bawling, trying to shout him down.

Well, for a little while the thing hung in the balance. Everybody talked

at once. The witch doctor screamed. Biggles got hold of the fellow who could speak English and showed him the culprit, while Algy and I stood there with our guns at the ready in case the argument should go against us. Then, suddenly, there was another nasty silence.

Looking up to see what had caused it, there was Donald, complete in top hat and frock coat, advancing towards the crowd. It looked like sheer suicide, and we shouted to him to come back. Would he? Not on your life. When he was only a few yards from the spears he holds up his camera, and whoof, there was another flash from his flashlight equipment. That did it. The natives, who were already suffering from one shock, couldn't stand another the same night. They began to back. Then they lost their heads and stampeded. Biggles hung on to the old fellow who spoke our language, gave him a handful of cigarettes, and told him to go to the village and explain the trick. Which he probably did, although I don't know for certain. We didn't wait to see. As soon as the coast was clear we made a bee-line for the canoe, and so back to the machine.

We took the crooked half-breed with us and handed him over to the authorities who, when they heard our story, clapped him in jail. *hat finally became of him I don't know; he was still in jail awaiting trial when we took off for home.

That's all. Now you know why I get a bit nervous when I'm swimming and something touches me under the water. I remember that crocodile and imagine its teeth are sinking into my leg. Of course, the reason why I wasn't hurt when the Crooning Croc grabbed me was because, although the fellow inside had an arrangement for moving the jaws, there was no power in them. Unfortunately, I didn't know that at the time. At any rate, that was the end of the Crooning Croc of Congawonga, and so ends the story.

Ginger stood up, reaching for his clothes. "It's getting chilly," he declared. "I'm going back to the mess for a spot of tea."

V

THE ADVENTURE OF THE OXIDIZED

GROTTO

FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT ANGUS MACKAIL took the piece of duralumin from the vice at which he had been working, fitted it to the cigarette case that he had been repairing, and dropped it into his pocket.

"Queer stuff, duralumin," he observed, addressing in general the officers who were watching him. It's light, yet tough. I wonder what aircraft manufacturers would do without it? Hello ! It's five o'clock. I'm going down to the mess to get a cup of tea."

There was a move towards the officers' mess.

"Talkin of metals," remarked Algy Lacey, "it was once my privilege—I can't say pleasure—to see a specimen of what must be the most uncommon metal in the world, a metal so rare that it was lost to science for thousands of years. In fact, it has often been asserted that no such metal exists, or ever did exist."

"Then how did people come to know about it in the first place?" :queried Tug Carrington suspiciously.

"Because it is mentioned by more than one ancient scribe."

"What's the name of this metal ? " inquired Henry Harcourt.

"Orichakum."

"Never heard of it."

"Few people have. Certainly nobody had seen a piece for thousands of years until Biggles, Ginger, Dr. Duck and myself rediscovered it in Borneo. Orichalcum is a puzzle that has survived the ages."

"Tell me more about it," pleaded Henry.

"To do that would involve us in an argument as to whether or not the lost continent of Atlantis ever did exist. According to ancient history, a land called Atlantis once flourished where the Atlantic Ocean now rolls. It disappeared some time before the Flood. For years arguments have raged about it. Nobody knows the facts, and nobody ever will know—at least, not unless somebody drains the water out of the Atlantic, and that would be a tidy job. Old Plato had a lot to say about Atlantis, although it had disappeared before his time—that is, about four hundred B.C. Plato, you remember, was an author and lecturer of note. According to him, the people of Atlantis were highly civilized; they were clever craftsmen, working in gold, silver, and orichalcum, although this last metal seems to have had some curious properties. Its colour was a bright shining red, and it flashed with an inward fire. Other old writers mention the stuff, and as the descriptions agree, there would appear to be some truth in the story. Anyway, that's all that's known about it."

"And do you mean to say you actually found some of this stuff?" cried Henry.

Algy shrugged his shoulders. "Well, we did and we didn't, as you might say."

"Tell us what happened."

"Not" me." Algy was emphatic. "You wouldn't believe me if I did. Get Ginger to tell you—he was there."

"It wasn't altogether a satisfactory affair," put in Ginger, a trifle sadly.

"Never mind, spill it," demanded Tex O'Hara.

"You won't get any peace until you do," put in Biggles, who had been listening to the conversation with a faint smile on his face.

Ginger nodded. "All right, then. I'll tell you while we have tea." And this is the narrative as he gave it:

You may be sure (he began) that this particular trip, one of those which we made with Dr. Augustus Duck, otherwise Donald, didn't start as an orichalcum hunt. I'd never even heard of the stuff. To tell the truth, none of us had the remotest idea of what we were going to find when we got to Borneo. But I'd better start right at the beginning.

There was one thing to be said for Donald's curious collection of weird information. It always had a foundation of fact. I mean, he never let us down. When we got to our objective we never drew blank; there was always something there to account for the rumour, even if the thing turned out to be something different from what we expected.

As you may suppose, we soon got accustomed to his freakish tales, but I must confess that my credulity was strained to breaking point when he turned up one day and told us why he had decided to go to Borneo. When Biggles asked for further information he held up one of those quaint old Victorian magazines called *The Family Entertainer*, dated 1880.

In this magazine there was an article purporting to be true, written by a man who signed himself Tuan Sommers. He was a planter in Borneo, working his own up-river estate at the foot of the Leelong Mountains. Briefly, it appeared that in one of these mountains there was a cave. And it was no ordinary cave. It was like no other cave on earth.

Everything in it was white—but it wasn't chalk. When I say everytg I mean everything.

The bats were white. The wothis were white. There were even plants with white leaves and white flowers. At the time the article was written the world was full of wonders, and nobody apparently had thought it worth while to

investigate this particular masterpiece. We agreed with the Doctor that it sounded interesting. Biggles asked, naturally, if the Doctor expected him to wander about Borneo looking for a cave that might, or might not, be there. He pointed out that it was hardly to be expected that Tuan Sommers, who had written the article some sixty years ago, was still there—or, for that matter, still alive.

Donald chuckled and produced some more documents. It seemed that he had already been busy. He had sent a cable to the Government House at Sarawak, and had received a reply to the effect that old Tuan Sommers was dead, but his son, Tuan Sommers Junior, was still very much alive, and was, in fact, still running the estate. Another cable had been sent to young Tuan asking if the cave was still there, and if so, might we explore it?

Was there a place near at hand where a marine aircraft could be landed? Obviously, we couldn't land in the jungle.

The answer came back "yes ", as far as he knew the cave was still there, although he—

Tuan Sommers Junior —had never seen it. The natives, holding the place to be haunted, wouldn't go near it. It would be possible to land a flying boat on a straight stretch of river near his bungalow, which was only about twelve miles from the alleged site of the cave.

Not only would he have the river cleared of obstructions in readiness for our arrival, but he would be pleased to offer us the hospitality of his roof while we were there.

This made the trip sound easy, a mere picnic, in fact—and up to a point it was. But only up to a point, as you will hear.

With one thing and another it took us about a month to get to Mojok, which was the name of Sommers's estate. That didn't worry us, for we were in no particular hurry. As the cave had been there for at least sixty years there was no reason to suppose that it would disappear at that particular moment. In due course we landed on the river, and

found young Sommers a very charming fellow. He seemed pleased to see us, for he had few visitors at his jungle retreat, and I must say he did us very well.

But when we took a look at the jungle, the twelve mile trek that lay between us and the cave didn't look so good. There was no possible landing place nearer, so it meant that the journey would have to be made on foot. Moreover, as the cave was situated at a height of about ten thousand feet, the way was all uphill. There are some tidy-sized mountains in Borneo. Unfortunately, Sommers couldn't come with us because just at that time he had to go down to the coast to attend to some Government business, but he offered to lend us a guide—one of his Punan headmen. This fellow wouldn't go right to the cave, because, like the rest, he was scared of it, but he would at least take us to a point from where we should have no difficulty in finding it.

Well, we set off. Sommers implored Donald to wear more suitable clothes, but the old man refused point blank to be parted from his top hat and frock coat. He said he had worn them all his life—which wasn't hard to believe—and wasn't going to discard them for any jungle. How he didn't melt in the heat, I don't know. In the bamboo swamps through which we first had to pass it was terrific—sticky, steamy heat. The mosquitoes were bad, and there was a fair number of snakes, but the worst curse of all was the leeches. They always are, in any tropic jungle. It doesn't seem to matter what you wear, some of the little beasts always manage to get inside and cling to your skin. We had to make frequent stops to remove the brutes.

The fungi fascinated me—the most amazing forms you ever saw, all colours of the rainbow. Pitcher plants hung everywhere like enormous bowls of putrid water. If you touched one you got a pint of stinking fluid, all mixed up with dead flies, down your neck. Still, we accepted all this as a matter of course.

At four thousand feet we entered a new world. I'd read somewhere about the moss forests of Borneo, but the writer didn't do them justice. Every inch of the ground, every tree trunk, every branch was covered with moss, thick green cushions of it, mats of it. It hung from the trees in festoons so that you appeared to be going through a fairy cave illuminated by pale green lights. I saw some wonderful orchids, too, but they weren't what we had

come for. It was much cooler now, which made the going easier.

In due course we reached a spot where Ulu, our Punan guide, stopped and told us he wouldn't go any farther. I was rather surprised at this because he spoke English quite well—he had been working for Tuan Sommers for years. But I suppose the old superstitions were still ingrained in him, and he stuck his toes in.

According to the Doctor's altimeter we were now at nine thousand feet, still in moss forest, although the moss was less luxuriant, and the trees stunted and gnarled. Ulu pointed to a sort of ridge about five hundred feet above us and told us that we should find the cave there. He would wait—not that he expected ever to see us again. Although we had started at dawn it was now eleven o'clock, which meant that we had been six hours covering twelve miles—pretty good going in jungle, and uphill at that. Ulu said he would wait for a few hours. If we didn't come back he would know that the devil-devils had got us, and return alone. He wasn't going to be caught out in the jungle, after dark—no, sir.

Reckoning that the return journey, being downhill, shouldn't take us more than four hours, we had until about three o'clock to do our exploring. So we had four hours before us—unless, of course, we cared to spend the night there and find our own way back the next day. We didn't discuss this. I think we all assumed that four hours would be long enough. At any rate, off we went, and there, sure enough, was the cave, a sort of narrow slit in the face of the cliff, obviously a flaw in the rock of which the mountain was composed. Outside the cave the moss was extremely thick, but instead of being green it had become a sort of dirty white. It was all as dry as dust, too, and crunched under our feet, rather like dried coral. We came upon an enormous python crawling through it; it was the same colour, sickly white. The creature seemed to be sick, too; at least, it made no attempt to attack us. In fact, it seemed to take it all its time to move at all. Before very long we knew why. We all carried torches, so in we went.

One glance was enough to reveal that old Tuan

Sommers hadn't lied. I won't say that the cave was white near the entrance; it wasn't; it was more of a pale grey; but as we went on it quickly became paler, and then dead white, snow white, an extraordinary spectacle. And now a singular state of affairs arose.

Everything being white, we could see nothing but shadows. I bumped into a white bush without seeing it, and Algy nearly put his foot on a fair-sized snake. It was as white as the floor, so it's not surprising that

he didn't see it. The snake, a queer, blunt-headed creature, hissed and went off down the cave. We looked at the bush. The flower, a kind of orchid, was white. The leaves were white and the stalks were white, so you could only tell which was which by the shape. There were flies on it, white flies, while white bats fluttered over our heads. In the light of our torches they looked like enormous white butterflies. You can't imagine how peculiar the whole effect was.

Donald, of course, was tickled to death. It was he who discovered that the white stuff came off, like fine powder. He picked up a white worm from the floor, and drawing it through his hand, showed us that his palm was white. I did the same thing with a leaf.

"It's a deposit of some sort," declared Donald. "Of what ? " asked Biggles.

" Ah, that's what we've got to find out," answered Donald, smelling the stuff. "I think it's metallic," he decided. Our best plan would be to collect a piece of the rock and take it outside into the light. We shall then be able to examine it more closely."

As he spoke he knocked a chip off the wall and asked me to carry it outside. When I went to pick it up I got the shock of my life. Once, when Biggles was running a transport company, I helped him to carry some gold, and that's pretty heavy stuff As a matter of detail, a cubic foot of it weighs eleven hundred pounds—say, half a ton. But this stuff . . .

well, I had only to lift a small piece, but it took me all my time to drag it outside.

The first thing we noticed was the colour. The part that had been exposed was still white, but the new face, where it had been chipped off, was red—a rich, glowing crimson.

There was no doubt that it was a metal of

some sort. Donald was as white as a sheet, and started babbling something about orichalcum. That was the first I ever heard of it.

Then an amazing thing happened. The stuff started to smoke. I went to turn it over—and let out a yell. It was hot. We could only assume that exposure to light must have had this effect on it, because it was cold enough inside.

Biggles said to me, "What are you looking so scared about ? "

I answered, "Nothing." As I spoke I looked at his face and saw that it was chalky white. "

You don't look too happy yourself," I said.

It was old Donald who realized the truth. "Great heavens ! " he cried, "the stuff is oxidizing on us. We shall all have a coating of metal on us if we stay here."

It was true. I looked at my hands. They were like chalk—horrible. "Here, let's get out of this," I suggested.

By this time the piece of metal that I'd dragged outside was glowing scarlet; we were some distance away from it, but we could feel the heat from where we stood. Donald refused to go without taking a specimen of the stuff with him, although to touch the piece I had brought out was obviously impossible. Then, when we looked at the mouth of the cave we got another shock ; smoke was curling out—due, presumably, Donald thought, to the action of the air on the new face where he had knocked a piece "off. But what properly upset the apple-cart was the piece lying outside. I told you that the moss and undergrowth was as dry as tinder. Well, it caught fire, and in a few minutes the whole area was a sheet of flame. We had to bolt for our lives.

What happened after that we don't know. The Doctor thought that the heat outside must have had some effect on the oxidized area just inside the cave, causing it to start glowing; this in turn affected the main lode in the interior. We don't know for pure. All I know is that when I looked back from the place where we had left Ulu the whole ridge was a blinding white-hot glow, painful to look at. Ulu had gone. Apparently he had lost his nerve as soon as the smoke appeared, so he didn't wait as he had promised. We made for home without him.

I shan't forget that march in a hurry. What with the heat, and the smoke that rolled down into the valley, it was like toiling through an inferno. To make matters worse, the oxide acted as an irritant on our skins, so that before we got back to the bungalow the parts that had come in contact with the metal *ere blistered. We were at the bungalow for a month, recovering.

What would have happened had we stayed in the cave longer than we did I can only guess. The Doctor is inclined to think that we should either have become permanently oxidized, like the snakes and bats, or died from the effects.

Donald submitted a report to the Royal Society after we got home, with the result that another party went to the mountain to make further investigations. But apparently we had spoilt the grotto. It couldn't be found. The whole of that part of the mountain where it had been had melted into a solid glassy-looking mass of rock. Whether the orichalcum inside—if that, in fact, is what it was—had burnt itself out, or whether it remains, nobody knows, and unless an earthquake occurs to expose the cave again, nobody is likely to know. If it's still there, as far as I'm concerned it can stay there. I've no desire to have an armour-plated hide.

Ginger got up. "Well, chaps, that's all. I'm going up to have a look at my machine; she's flying a bit tail heavy."

VI

THE ADVENTURE OF THE PURPLE CLOUD

THE hour was late. The mess fire, around which the officers of No. 666 (Fighter) Squadron had congregated, was low. Flight-Lieutenant Bertie Lissie was asleep on the settee. Some of the others were reading. Conversation, which for some time had been desultory, had died away.

Henry Harcourt, who was sitting next to Ginger, broke the silence.

Said he, "Ginger, I've been thinking about these adventures of yours with Dr. Augustus Duck. There's one thing I'm not clear about. What did these trips really amount to? I mean, did you discover anything of major importance? Did you achieve anything really useful? "

"Certainly," answered Ginger promptly. "At Labyrinth Island we put an end to the activities of a gang of skin smugglers. By putting the kybosh on the Crooning Crocodile we made life easier for a tribe of ignorant savages."

"Yes, I know all about that, but I was thinking more about the scientific aspect, which was really the object of these expeditions."

Ginger thought for a moment before answering. "I suppose you would think I was exaggerating if I said that we may have saved the continent of America from devastation.

You'd call that an achievement of major importance—wouldn't you?"

I certainly would," acknowledged Henry. "But do you really mean that?"

"Definitely. Indeed, Donald is firmly convinced that we saved the world—although, of course, the human population of this ball of mud which we call the earth is blissfully unaware of it. Mind you, I'm not asserting that this is so ; but Donald thinks so, and he's no fool. But for the fact that I had something to do with it, which would make my opinion sound like conceit, I should say that the Doctor isn't far wrong. Five years ago people went on enjoying themselves, little knowing that a purple cloud, a cloud of death, was forming in the west."

"Where, exactly?"

"Central America. The state known as Nicaragua—which; incidentally, is a bigger place than you might suppose."

" And what was this cloud?" persisted Henry. "That's a longish story."

"Never mind, go ahead and tell us."

"Yes, Ginger," put in some of the others who had been listening.

"All right," agreed Ginger, and this is the story as he told it: We were following the Pan-American route from South America to the United States in our trusty old aircraft, the Wanderer. We had no intention of landing in Nicaragua, but we ran into a head wind which slowed us down, and brought the petrol gauge lower than was comfortable. So Biggles, to be on the safe side, put the Wanderer down at Managua—that's the capital—to fill up. It took us some time to get the petrol, so as we were in no particular hurry we decided to stay the night.

Nicaragua is a nice spot, fertile, but like most of the Central American states, undeveloped. That doesn't worry the population, who are happy in their own quiet way under a real democratic Government. They are a pastoral people, and make a fairly comfortable living out of the soil. They don't have to work very hard to do that, and as they don't believe in working hard, they are content. They export coffee and bananas—I mention this for reasons which you will understand presently.

At the time we were there everyone was talking about a purple cloud, so sitting at a cafe in the evening, Biggles, who speaks Spanish, the local language, asked a citizen what all the fuss was about. He told us that the thing had begun when, about a year before, a canoe had come

down the Matagena River with a family on board. It seems that they owned a banana plantation way back in the hinterland, and they had a tragic story to tell.

They said that one evening a little purple cloud had appeared in the west. It passed over during the night—at least, there was no sign of it in the morning. Nor was there any sign of the plantation. Everything except the hard wood had gone. The earth was as bare as the middle of the Sahara. Not a leaf, not a blade of grass, remained. The wretched owners of the land were not

only ruined but were faced with immediate starvation. They abandoned their farm and came down the river. A paragraph about this appeared in the local newspaper, but nobody took any notice.

Then more boats started coming down the river, and the tales the people in them told were always the same—always the same purple cloud that appeared in the evening and ate the country clean. One thing was significant. In the first place, the cloud was only a small affair, about an acre in extent; but the later reports made it clear that the cloud was swiftly getting bigger. By the end of six months it had become a formidable menace, not only in size but in its devastating effects. Family after family came down the river as plantation after plantation was wiped out. By the time we got there the whole north-eastern section of the country had been devastated; and the thing, whatever it was, was still spreading.

Yet so casual are these people, who never do to-day what can be put off until to-morrow, that nothing was done about it. True, a special committee had been appointed by the Government to investigate the matter, but they were still arguing as to how to set about it. The people who were most upset, and pressed for immediate action, were a few American managers of United States fruit companies. They were getting worried, and I don't wonder at it.

Discussing the matter, I could see that both Biggles and Donald took a serious view of this purple cloud. What they realized, although nobody else did, was this : if the cloud went on growing it was only a question of time before it spread beyond the frontiers of Nicaragua. The adjacent countries. of Costa Rica, Salvador and Honduras would be the next to feel the scourge, after which both North and South America could expect the purple visitation. By that time the thing might be so large that nobody, nothing, could stop it. At the rate the thing was growing, it was not outside the bounds of possibility that

ultimately this cloud would destroy the world.

As a result of our discussion Biggles and Donald went along to the special committee to see if they—or rather, the aircraft—could be of any assistance. Actually, I think they were both prompted more by curiosity than any other reason. Donald certainly was. All his biological instincts were aroused. It happened that when they got to the committee room an American planter, named Silas Weimer, was there, playing havoc because nothing had been done. He jumped at Biggles's offer, and persuaded the committee to accept it. The result was that instead of our going on in the morning as per schedule, we found ourselves booked for the wide open spaces, the back of beyond of Nicaragua, looking for a purple cloud. It was a fascinating proposition, and I must confess that I was as curious as the others to see what this cloud was made of.

- Starting at dawn, we got to the cloud-infested country the same day and established a base on a lake. The following morning we made our first survey flight, and I may tell you that it didn't take us long to confirm that the purple cloud was no myth. Admittedly, we didn't see the cloud, but we saw vast areas where the land had been cleared of vegetation, miles and miles of earth picked as clean as a dry bone. It looked pretty grim from the air.

Besides the plantations, whole forests had been stricken as though by lightning; all that remained were the leafless trunks and branches. It created an impression of wholesale death and destruction—not very nice, believe me. The question was, what had caused it?

Perhaps I'd better give you an idea of what the hinterland of Nicaragua is like. Most of it is tropical forest, through which one or two big rivers flow. The rest is what they call savannah—open grassland that in the States would be called prairie. Here the people have their farms and plantations. They plant crops until the ground is impoverished, then they burn down a few hundred acres of forest. When it has burnt out they

- leave the old land and move on to the new, rich soil. Villages are few and far between.

At the time of our visit the country had been practically evacuated on account of the purple cloud.

Well, we spent three days flying round, and in that time explored most of the north-east triangle of the country—the affected part. There was

only one spot we hadn't seen, and that was the remote northerly corner. Before doing that we had to go back for more petrol, and I could see Biggles was getting worried. Petrol is expensive in Nicaragua; we were using a lot, and if we didn't soon produce results we might not get paid for it.

However, we went back, heading north. The country was dead all the way. There was still no sign of the elusive cloud, and, frankly, I'd begun to wonder if we weren't making fools of ourselves, looking for something that didn't exist. I said so to Donald. We were flying over open savannah, or what had been savannah, at the time, and it may have been this fact that gave him the bright idea of landing to see just what had happened to the ground. Remember, so far we had only seen the devastation from the air.

It sounded a sensible scheme. If we could make a close examination of the leafless trees we might be able to form an idea of what agency, animal, mineral or vegetable, had caused the damage. 'Biggles agreed, so he cut the engine, lowered the wheels, and glided down to land. I went and sat next to him.

We glided down to a few hundred feet, and he leaned over the side, staring at the ground.

"That's queer," he said in a puzzled voice. "I don't think I ever saw ground quite that colour."

It was, in fact, a sort of reddish brown.

The words had barely left his lips when I saw the most amazing phenomenon I've ever seen in my life. The effect was so extraordinary that I wondered for an instant if I'd got a touch of fever. The ground seemed to float up towards us. Naturally, I came to the conclusion that although the Wanderer was practically on even keel we were in some extra?

rdinary way losing height bodily, so to speak. As a matter of fact, I've known a machine to be sucked down like that when it hits a "sinker", which is the reverse of hitting a bump.

But we weren't being sucked down. The carpet was

coming up to meet us. It may seem extraordinary, but I must confess that the purple cloud did not occur to me. One usually looks up, not down, for clouds.

Then the Cloud hit us. It hit the keel with a smack, as though we had made a bad landing on smooth water. At the last instant I realized what was happening, and so, I think, did Biggles, for I heard him yell something. The next second we were swallowed up in a dark, reddish-brown fog. In a flash it had smothered the windscreen, and I could see it tearing past the windows. The inside of the machine was nearly as dark as midnight. I tell you, it was a weird sensation. It made me dizzy.

Biggles jerked on the engine and pulled the stick back. The machine zoomed, and I guessed he was trying to get above the stuff, whatever it was. At the same time Donald's curiosity must have got the better of him, for he opened one of the side windows a fraction of an inch to collect a specimen of the cloud. Well, he got it. Before you could say Jack Robinson the stuff was pouring in like muddy water. Algy yelled, "Look out ! It'

s alive!"

And so it was. The cloud was composed of myriads of insects, like tiny locusts. It was clear that we were in a mess—and that's the only thing that was clear. Biggles yelled to Donald to shut the window, but he couldn't, because the stuff, flung back by the slipstream, was being lashed into his face like purple hailstones. As the insects struck him they seemed to burst, and his face and shoulders were a sticky purple mass of slime.

The inside of the cabin, where the insects struck, was in the same unholy mess. Had the insects been poisonous we should have been goners, there's no doubt of that. As it was, I thought our time had come, for while we were still in the cloud the engine choked, and I didn't need telling what was wrong. The insects were being sucked into the air intake, and so filling the cylinders with a lovely purple glue.

Biggles started gliding down. There was nothing else he could do. I got ready for the crash when we hit the floor, for there was no question of seeing it. I was trying to remember what was underneath, whether the

ground was flat or undulating, when the cloud turned rust colour, and then pale mauve.

We had run out of it. We were only just in time, too, for we were within fifty feet of the ground. At the last second the engine picked up

again, with the most horrible noise you ever heard; it didn't give full revs, but it gave us enough power to choose a landing place.

Looking back, I could see our exhaust spurting stuff like violet ink—the pulverized corpses of the bugs that had been through the engine.

How Biggles got the machine down I don't know because it was still practically dark, owing to the cloud that hung over us. It seemed to stretch for miles, heading in a northerly direction. When we were down we got out and had a look at the machine. You never saw such a sight. When we started it was silver; now it was purple. It oozed filthy purple slime at every point. It

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dripped. We weren't much better ourselves, f it comes to that.

Biggles looked at the cloud for a minute, then ordered us back into the machine.

"What are you going to do?" asked Donald. "Follow it," answered Biggles tersely.

"What for ? " gasped Algy.

"We've got to see where this pest has its headquarters," returned Biggles. "Don't you realize that these creatures are increasing every day? If that cloud gets much bigger it won't be a matter of just wiping out Nicaragua. Once it overflows into the Amazon basin there'll be no stopping it. It will eat up the entire continent."

We hadn't thought of that. I think it gave us all a shock to realize that if nothing was done about the cloud, the world was in for a thin time.

Well, we took off again and chased the cloud. We followed it for about a hundred miles, and saw it disappear into one of the many big lakes. When we cruised over the water there wasn't a sign of it. It was plain enough to see what was happening. The locusts—

they were a sort of locust—lived in the lake. What had given them birth we don't know, but there they were. Every evening the cloud rose and swept out across the country to a fresh pasture, where it devoured everything before returning to the lake.

We headed back for Managua, and just managed to creep in with a

wheeling engine.

Biggles found Silas Weimer, the American planter, and gave him the facts. Welmer went to the committee and did some fast talking. We went with him. What was to be done?

Between us we worked it out. The only chance was to destroy the insects by spraying them from the air, in the same way they now spray cotton fields to kill the pests, and in Africa spray swamps to kill the mosquitoes. We cabled the United States for a strong insecticide to be sent down by air. At the same time Biggles rang up the United States Department of Agriculture and warned them of the danger. That set things buzzing.

The next day machines began to arrive with the poison, and the spraying apparatus. We worked like slaves getting the Wanderer ready for the attack. As soon as she was ready we went to work. Flying twelve hours a day is hard work, and we kept that up for a week. We sprayed the lake, and the country round it. Every evening the cloud rose up as usual, but every evening it was smaller. In the end we finished off the survivors in the air. We sat aloft and waited for the cloud—now quite small—to appear. Then we let the insects have it. We chased them whichever way they turned, and the cloud grew smaller and smaller until it finally fizzled out altogether. The next evening the cloud failed to appear and we knew that our job was done. All the same, we put in another week spraying the whole of the affected section, and that, apparently, completed the trick. The purple cloud was never seen again, and we heard afterwards that the blighted areas were recovering. Well, that's the story. It was not until it was all over, and we had a good talk about it, that we realized fully what might have happened if the old Wanderer hadn't turned up when she did, or if we'd gone on without hearing of the purple cloud. The people who are now fighting each other in Europe little know how near they came to being wiped out altogether, for if the bugs had got out of hand there wouldn't have been a leaf, or a blade of grass left on the face of the earth. By the time the insects had finished it would have been just a ball of mud. Every living thing would have, died of starvation, including the bugs themselves, and the old world would have had to start all over again from the beginning. Think about that when you go to bed—it's a fascinating thought.

Ginger looked at the clock. "Great Scott!" he muttered, "look at the time. And I'm on early patrol in the morning."

THE ADVENTURE OF THE PATAGONIAN

GIANTS

"THE news seems to be pretty gloomy," remarked Flying-Officer Henry Harcourt, switching off the mess radio and turning away from the instrument. "Still, perhaps it isn't as bad as they make out."

"Dash it, you can't expect to win all the time," protested Tug Carrington.

"Good for you, Tug," put in Flying-Officer Ginger Hebblethwaite. "Some people are never satisfied. The trouble is, they don't think. In fact, taking it all round, the human race is a queer mixture of contradictions."

"So what, professor ? " inquired Tex O'Hara sarcastically.

"Nothing," returned Ginger imperturbably. "I just made a remark. I'll qualify it if you like. People will. always believe what they want to believe; conversely, they scoff at anything they don't like. When sailors first came home and said they had seen fishes flying in the air, people laughed. Nobody believed it. Yet those same people who wouldn'

t believe that a fish could fly were quite willing to believe the clever roustabouts who walked about the country professing to be able to tell fortunes. The same with some of these yarns I've been telling you about Dr. Duck. Who, outside this mess, would believe them?

You probably wouldn't believe them yourselves but for the fact that Biggles and Algy are here to bear me out. I say there are thousands of people in this country ready to sneer at anything unusual, just because they've never seen the thing, or because it is never likely to bring them any profit; yet they're quite willing to pay five shillings for a bottle of coloured water guaranteed to cure all ills—just because some quack says so.,,

"You don't believe in patent medicines, evidently?" observed Taffy Hughes.

"I didn't say that," denied Ginger. "Some of them are probably very good, and do what is claimed of them. In fact, I once nearly started in business in that line myself."

There was a shout of laughter, but Ginger remained serious. "That's right, go on, laugh,"

he sneered. "Why, you poor goofs, I once had my hands on a kind of medicine that would—but never mind."

"Come on, what would it do? " demanded Lord Bertie Lissie, polishing his eyeglass.

"It would give you the strength of ten men," declared Ginger calmly. After a dose of this muscle-syrup you could have put a garden roller on your shoulder and walked off with it—if you'd wanted a garden roller."

"Now—now," chided Bertie reprovingly.

"On the label of my bottles I was going to have a picture of a fellow tossing an elephant into the air, and underneath the slogan, 'Every Man His Own Samson ', " returned Ginger calmly.

"Why didn't you ? " inquired Henry suspiciously. "Because there was a snag in it,"

replied Ginger frankly.

"What was the snag?"

Matter of fact, there were two or three; but the chief trouble was, under the influence of this Herculean dope a fellow, not being used to it, didn't know his own strength, and that being so, he was likely to do himself, and anyone near him, a serious mischief. After I'd had a dose I broke everything I touched."

There was more laughter, but Ginger went on. "Another snag was, it made you grow—

then your clothes didn't fit."

"And where did all this happen, if I may ask ? " inquired Bertie coldly.

"In Patagonia."

"Was Dr. Duck there?"

"Of course."

"What were you doing in Patagonia ? "

"Looking for the Patagonian giants."

"What gave you that bright idea ? "

Ginger shook his head.

It's a long story."

"Never mind. We've nothing to do unless Jerry comes over. Tell us about it."

Ginger got into a comfortable position and proceeded with the narrative : When Columbus discovered America, as you may have heard, about four hundred and fifty years ago, he was soon followed by a lot of other fellows anxious to grab anything that was going. They explored the coast, some going north, others south. Those who went south, if they went far enough, eventually came to the southern tip of the continent—Cape Horn. They had to sail round this tip to get up the other, the Pacific, side. This was no easy matter, and things weren't made any easier by the natives who lived on the mainland. According to all accounts, these people were giants.

Admittedly, in those days some pretty tall stories were told, but there seemed to be no reason why mariners should invent a race of giants if they didn't really exist. It wasn't as though only one ship's company saw them. Scores of people saw these giants, and in a good many official log-books we find descriptions of them. It is not surprising, therefore, that these giants became an accepted fact. But later, when steamboats appeared, and scientists went out to look for the giants, they couldn't be found. What happened to them nobody knows. This is a mystery that has puzzled scientists ever since. It puzzled Dr.

Duck. That these giants existed we need not doubt. Master Francis Pretty, who went round Patagonia with three ships under General Thomas Candish, and afterwards wrote an account of the voyage, says that they caught one of these giants, and, by measurement, found that the soles of his feet were eighteen inches long. That, in proportion, would make the man about nine feet tall. As a matter of detail I saw some who must have been taller than that.

Mind you, I knew nothing about this until Dr. Duck came in one day and gave us the benefit of all the information that he had collected on the subject. His idea was, as you may suppose, that we should go and have a look for these lost giants. And that was really the object of our voyage, although it turned out somewhat differently from what we expected. At any rate, we went, and I may say that it was no picnic.

I've never been so cold and miserable in my life as I was in Patagonia. I don't mind clean, hard frost, but the icy wind nearly got me down. Of all the bleak spots on the face of the earth Patagonia must be the worst.

There's only one word to describe the country, and that is terrific. The mountains are enormous, and they're just piled together in one frightful conglomeration. Rocks, boulders, ice, snow and glaciers—that's Patagonia. I did see one or two stunted trees, but they had been distorted by the frozen blast into hideous shapes. It is just the sort of spot where you'd expect to find monsters, and I don't wonder that the early navigators did their best to keep clear of it. There's no question of landing aircraft on the open sea; it's too rough; nor are there any level areas of land where a machine could be put down ; but on account of the huge waves that beat on the shore there are places where the water has eaten into the land, after the manner of Norwegian fiords, and these, being protected by towering cliffs, are more like lakes than bays.

We made our first landing on one of these, much to the surprise of the armies of penguins and sea elephants which, for some reason best known to themselves, have chosen this soul-chilling spot for their headquarters. I didn't like it a bit; nor did Biggles.

Had the aircraft been damaged—and that possibility was always on the boards—I don't suppose we should ever have been heard of again.

The only petrol we had was what we carried, so we had to use it carefully. We reckoned we had enough for about three fairly extensive survey flights.

The first two flights revealed only those things that could have been seen from any one of the mountains—just a waste of rock, lashed by the wind into terrifying shapes, scored and scarred by glaciers and gulches. I'd seen some bad country, but never anything like this, and I broke into a cold perspiration every time I thought of what must happen if our engine let us down. Actually, it did, but by one of those miracles—but let me keep the story in proper sequence.

On the third, our last trip, Biggles headed north, deep into the hinterland, perhaps the most inaccessible spot on the face of the earth. Naturally, as we were now heading away from the South Pole, a slight change of temperature became 'perceptible, and this was reflected on the terrain below. Some of the depressions were filled with water instead of ice, and there were greenish areas showing where some sort

of vegetation had secured a hold. This, we found out later, was chiefly moss, heather, and dwarf birch trees.

We were flying up a long depression, with a narrow strip of water marking the deepest part, when the engine coughed. We were only a few hundred feet up at the time, so things looked grim. Biggles turned at once and headed back for our base. The engine kept on choking and picking up again, but as soon as Biggles started to climb steeply to get over the surrounding mountains it vibrated so badly that I fully expected it to tear itself off its bearers. I was sitting next to Biggles. He looked at the mountains and shook his head.

"I daren't risk it," he said, looking pretty worried. "We shall never get back. Our only chance is to stay here, where we can at least get down, and try to locate the cause of the trouble." It was obviously the most sensible thing to do so he turned again, and going into a glide, put the Wanderer down on the water. It was a rotten landing—one of the few times I've seen Biggles slip up. But he's only human after all, and I reckon anyone would have made the same boob. The water was inky black, and reflected the sky like a mirror, making it almost impossible to judge just where the surface was. He had just flattened out when we hit the drink an almighty crack that shook me not a little.

However, the Wanderer stood up to it, and although she flung a lot of water over herself, she finished up in one piece. As soon as we'd recovered from the shock we taxied up to the bank, a shallow shelving beach of shingle, and made ready to have a look at the engine.

I was unpacking the tool kit when Algy let out a strangled cry that brought me out on the hull to see what was wrong. I took one look and nearly passed out. There were the giants, men and women, right on top of us—so to speak. They were standing at the edge of the water, looking at us. Behind them were a lot of square-cut holes in the face of the cliff from which they had evidently emerged. There was one saving grace about the situation.

They didn't look hostile, although some of them were carrying clubs that appeared to have been made out of the knotted roots of trees. In fact, the women looked a bit scared and hung back. Had it not been for their beards we should have found it hard to tell which were men, for they were all dressed alike—just one simple garment of what seemed to be sheepskins. Their legs were bare, but their feet were bound up with thongs of the same stuff. I suppose their average height would be about nine feet. That may not sound very tall, but it made us look like midgets. Then one of them, supposing that we wanted to

come ashore, caught hold of the Wanderer's bows with a hand like a leg of mutton and pulled the machine up on the beach—just like that. The aircraft might have been a toy canoe. That was the first indication we had of their strength.

Biggles, looking a bit pale about the gills—as well he might—made the traditional signs of friendship, holding Out his hands as much as to say, "Come on, folks, it's all right."

There was no question of doing anything else. We couldn't run away, and it would have been crazy to start rough tactics; so we just tried to look as though we'd been hobnobbing with giants all our lives. You ought to have seen Donald's face. Taking the camera, he went

ashore, whereupon one of the giants grabbed his topper to have a look at it. It seemed to amuse them. Another one in spite of Donald's protests, took the camera; but either because he didn't know his own strength, or because he wasn't used to handling delicate mechanism, the silly ass squashed it flat between his finger and thumb and picked it to pieces. Donald let out a bleat like a wounded sheep, but it was too late to save the camera.

But the real shock was yet to come. One of them spoke. It was a hoarse, uncouth voice, but the words sounded like, "Where have you come ? " We all looked at each other.

Biggles gasped, "Am I crazy, or is that fellow talking English?"

The same giant answered. He said, "Me talk. Me Amos."

This shook me to the quick, because although the fellow spoke English he certainly didn't look British. Of course, this made things easier. Biggles said we'd been shipwrecked, and they all nodded as if they understood. Upon this they invited us into one of their cave-houses. It turned out to be a much bigger room than we expected ; in fact, it was the general assembly hall, so, following their example, we sat down on heaps of dry moss. It wasn't very comfortable because there was a fire burning in the middle, both for heat and light, and as there was no proper chimney the smoke got in our eyes. Next, they produced a whacking great oyster shell for each of us. A woman staggered in with a cauldron of soup and sloshed some into each shell.

"It's going to be all right," said Biggles, looking mighty relieved.

There were no spoons, but taking cue from our hosts, we picked up the shells and drank the soup. It was awful. It tasted like nothing on

earth. I'd no sooner drunk mine than an extraordinary feeling started to creep over me. I felt sort of elated, as though I were somewhere else, looking at myself. How can I describe it . . . ? I felt that I was swelling



Dr. Duck gets first-hand information.

like a balloon, as if I was as light as a feathers

"Great Scott ! I've been poisoned," gasped Algy, looking scared stiff.

Biggles pointed out that it must be all right, because we were all—including the giants—

eating soup out of the same dish. The giants evidently understood Algy's alarm, and said something about the food making us strong. And it was true. I felt that I could push a house over. I had taken a screwdriver out of the tool chest, so to test myself I gave it a twist. It crumpled up like a straw. Biggles said, "You silly ass, don't do that." And taking the tool off me he straightened it. It might have been soft lead instead of steel.

Upon this Algy suggested that we got to work on the engine, because he was getting worried. So we all trooped out, giants as well, except Donald, who, with a notebook on his knee, started talking to the head giant. We got busy on the machine. The trouble turned out to be 4 blocked petrol lead. It was dark by the time we'd cleared it. Algy wanted to get off right away and risk a landing at our base in the moonlight, but Donald was enjoying himself and refused to go. It seemed that while we had been working on the machine he had been making discoveries. In front of him were several pieces of faded parchment which, he told us, were regarded by the natives as tribal treasures. And they explained a good deal. I couldn't read the writing on these parchments, but Donald, who had studied them, said they were pages out of an old sea log-book. The writing was early English, with a lot of Norman-French and Latin mixed up with it. There was a crude chart, lettered in Spanish, which bore the date 1381.

"That means," Donald pointed out, "that these people were the real discoverers of America—certainly the first colonists. You realize that if this date is correct, and there is no reason to doubt it, the ancestors of these people must have landed here a hundred years before Columbus, who didn't cross the Atlantic until 1492. We know from William of Worcester's Annals of England, dated 1324, that the existence of the New World was known long before Columbus's time. He says that two ships went out from Bristol to find the island of Brazil—and that was not an isolated venture. There seems to be no doubt whatever that in 1381 an English ship got across. Probably it was wrecked on the coast. At any rate, the sailors couldn't get back, and they must have settled here, or, in the first place, near the coast, and intermarried with the natives. When the first Elizabethan mariners reported giants here they little knew that they were talking about their own countrymen. They were too scared to land and make inquiries."

The giants had no idea of their origin. As far as they knew, they had always dwelt there.

Their diet was pathetically frugal, for the inhospitable country offered practically nothing in the way of food. They had two main dishes, moss and a kind of fresh-water mussel which they found in the lake. These were stewed together, and it was the mixture that gave them strength. So, by the curious irony of fate, instead of starving to death as you might suppose, they had accidentally struck a diet which not only offered the vitamins necessary to support life, but increased their stature and their strength to a tremendous degree. They themselves were unaware of this because, as far back as they could remember, they had never made contact with other people. They assumed that they were normal and that we were dwarfs.

Well, we spent the night there, and when we woke up in the morning our clothes were too small for us. I burst all my buttons. It was a most uncomfortable feeling. Not realizing our strength, we began to do silly things. I put my foot through the starboard plane. Biggles nearly tore the joystick out by the roots testing the controls. We smashed nearly everything we touched. As a result, we had a committee meeting and decided that we should have to be very careful. Actually, as we did not persist in the diet, the effect soon wore off, and we shrank to our normal sizes.

We left the giants the next day. We parted good friends. Donald, of course, had samples of both the moss and the mussels. Unfortunately, by the time we got home they had died, and were just a putrid mass. Donald made a report to a body of scientists, but, to put it mildly, they were sceptical; whereupon he decided to take a party out. By this time winter had set in, so the trip had to be postponed until the following summer. Then we chartered a big flying boat and went back, only to find that in our absence a frightful disaster had occurred. The cliff in which the houses were built had collapsed in one enormous landslide, not only burying the unfortunate giants, who must have been in their caves, but filling the entire valley. There wasn't even a place to land. It was a terrible disappointment for poor Donald, but there was nothing we could do about it, so after cruising round for a While we had to come home again. And that's how the matter rests.

Donald swears that he's going back again one day with an army of workmen to clear the landslide ; he'd need an army, too, for millions of tons of rock would have to be shifted.

Really, in his heart, he knows that the project is impossible.

Ginger yawned and looked up. "Well, that's all. I'm going for a stroll to get a spot of fresh air. Anyone coming?"

VIII

THE ADVENTURE OF THE MUSTY MAMMOTH

FLYING-OFFICER "Ginger" Hebblethwaite, tired after his second patrol that day, stretched luxuriously in front of the mess fire. The action drew up one leg of his slacks, showing a strip of bare flesh between the top of the sock and the bottom of the trousers.

Tex O'Hara noticed it, and smiled. Then his smile turned to a frown, and he leaned forward, eyes focusing on a mutilated section of skin.

"Say, kid, that's a whale of a scar you've got on your leg," he remarked. "How did you pick that one up?"

Ginger glanced down. "Oh, that," he returned carelessly. "I collected that in a little affair with a mammoth."

A hush fell upon the room, a silence broken by the tinkle of Bertie Lissie's eyeglass falling on the reading table.

"Would you mind saying that again?" murmured Bertie. "I seem to be getting a little hard of hearing."

"I said, that's where a mammoth gave me a poke with his tusk," repeated Ginger.

"Did you say mammoth?" put in Henry Harcourt, in a queer voice.

"That's what I said," replied Ginger. "M-a-mm-o—"

"We can spell," interrupted Henry irritably. "Are you asking us to believe that you were punctured by a prehistoric mammal—?"

"I'm not asking you to believe anything," yawned Ginger.

"But the last mammoth passed out centuries ago,"

,

declared Tug Carrington. Even I know that."

"You wouldn't have thought so if you'd been with me on the day I—but what's the use of arguing? Ask Biggles, if you don't believe me."

Something tells me that Dr. Donald was in this picnic," murmured Angus Mackail.

He was," acknowledged Ginger. "It was his party. I was only a spectator."

"Well, go ahead," invited Henry. "Tell us about it."

Ginger settled himself comfortably on the settee, and this is the story he told : It was a dark and stormy night—I'm not joking. That's a fact. We—that is, Biggles, Algy and myself—were at home, in London, having a short spell of civilization. We had been to the flicks, and had just finished supper when the door was flung open and Dr. Duck burst into the room. He was obviously in a state of high excitement—as they say in thrillers. However, we got him into a chair, and waited for him to get his breath.

"We've got to go," he declared.

"Yes, I can see that," answered Biggles. "The point is, where?"

To Greenland," says the Doctor.

Greenland's icy mountains," grinned Algy.

"Exactly," says the Doctor. "That's where we're going."

"For what?" says Biggles.

"Mammoths," says Donald.

When he was coherent this is what he told us. For some years there has been a regular trade in mammoth ivory—that is, tusks. These tusks nearly all come from Siberia where they are dug out of a sort of bog country called the Tundra. Presumably at some time in the past the mammoths browsed there, and when they died they fell in the bog and in this way were more or less preserved. Mammoth ivory, therefore, is not an uncommon commodity, although as few people are concerned with it we don't hear much about it.

Now it stands to reason that where the ivory is found, other remains—bones, and so on—

are also found. In the ordinary way this place is so far off the map that nobody bothers to go exploring, although Russian scientists have collected enough matter, skin and bones, to assemble one or two

pretty good stuffed mammoths. Now it appears that on the morning of the day Donald burst in on us, a Danish vessel had come into the Port of London, and with the cargo was a pair of well-preserved mammoth tusks. Donald went to have a look at them, and chatting with the skipper, he learned that the ivory had been picked up only a few days before at Holstenborg, in Greenland. The tusks had been brought in by an Eskimo hunter named Arkit. The skipper bought them as a speculation.

Donald bought them off him.

Having done this he sent a cablegram to the mayor of Holstenborg, asking if Arkit was still there. The answer came back confirming that he was. It struck Donald that this was an admirable opportunity of examining the site where a mammoth had been found. It would be comparatively easy to get to Greenland by air, and there wouldn't be the tiresome difficulties of getting permits, as there would be getting to Siberia. Well, the long and short of it was, Donald had got permission from the Danish authorities to go and have a look round. The idea was, as soon as we got to Greenland, to get hold of Arkit and induce him, by bribes if necessary, to show us the body—or what remained—

of the mammoth from which he had hacked the tusks.

I could see that Biggles wasn't very keen, but Donald was such a dear old boy that he couldn't nicely refuse. So we went. A few days later we were in Holstenborg, and there, sure enough, we found Arkit the Eskimo. He turned out to be a big, rather surly brute. I should tell you that this was in the summer, but there was still plenty of ice about, and it was pretty chilly. We parked the aircraft, the old Wanderer, on the water, and got down to business with Arkit—or tried to.

His nature turned out to be as surly as his looks, and it took us a long time to get anything out of him. Why he should be so secretive was not apparent—at least, not at the time. He seemed to take the view that in the location of the mammoth he possessed a valuable secret, and wasn't going to part with it. This, as it turned out, was true, but we weren't to know it at the time. In the end Donald raised the price so high that he couldn't refuse, and he gave us the information we wanted. The place was right in the middle of the country, about four hundred miles from anywhere. Greenland is a big country, in case you don't realize it.

Now another point arose. It soon became clear from what he told us

that our proposed trip into the interior was not one to be lightly undertaken. I don't think any of us quite realized it, but the whole central area of Greenland is one vast ice-cap, ten thousand feet thick. Snow falls, and it never melts. It compresses the snow underneath, and this has been going on for goodness knows how long. We should have to land on this cap, but as it stretches for hundreds of miles, and Arkit said there were plenty of level places, we thought we ought to be able to get down. At any rate, we decided to have a look at the place from the air. If landing didn't look reasonably safe we could always come back.

Well, we set off. Arkit refused to come. He didn't trust aeroplanes.

We started early in the morning. Actually, it made little difference what time we started because we were

going inside the Arctic Circle, and there, as you probably know, for a considerable period of the year the sun never entirely disappears ; consequently, it is light all night—

not as light as it is here in full day, of course, but rather an eerie light. Even so, it is plenty light enough to read a newspaper, so we had no fear of being benighted on the ice-cap.

I needn't waste time by describing the outward flight. Where we started there were occasional patches of rough grass and heather, and stunted birch trees. The country was mountainous, and glaciers could be seen everywhere grinding their way down to the sea; but as we headed north they gave way to an unbroken sheet of what appeared to be snow, but what was, in fact, a sort of white ice. In places it was level, but in others it was furrowed by gigantic corrugations, due, I suppose, to the ice following the configuration of the mountains far below it. We had to climb all the way because, as I have mentioned, the centre of the country rises to a height of nearly ten thousand feet.

Biggles had plotted a compass course, and eventually he announced that we had arrived over the objective. There was nothing to show that we had. We were cruising only a few hundred feet above the ice, and all I could see was an unbroken white plain, bounded on the north by what appeared to be a mass of broken ice piled up in the manner of small jagged mountains. If you can imagine a whole lot of icebergs flung down in a heap you'll get a pretty good idea of what this rough area was like. Biggles scouted around for some time, watching the ground and looking for the best place to land. I need hardly say that it was no place to make a mistake. We were muffled

up in heavy woollen sweaters, but even so a walk home would have been an unpleasant, not to say hazardous, experience.

In the end Biggles put the Wanderer down on a perfectly level strip of ice right up close against the broken stuff. He said he thought the ice-cliff would protect the machine from the north should a gale get up. I may say that I was not a little relieved when the Wanderer trundled to a smooth landing.

I was nearly at the top, having climbed, I suppose, about five hundred feet above the plain, and was passing through a kind of deep gulch when something made me look up.

Obviously, with everything all white, any dark object was conspicuous. And there, on a ledge, was a row of dark objects, objects that gave me the shock of my life. They reminded me vaguely of something, but at first I couldn't think what it was. Then I bered. The things were birds—but by no means ordinary birds. They were black, about the size of pelicans, with enormous beaks. One had his beak open, and I could see rows of long, ugly teeth. I'd never seen a bird with teeth. Nor had these birds any feathers that I could see. They were, in fact, pterodactyls. I remembered the name because I had once seen a picture of these creatures in a book. All this went through my head in a flash. The pteros didn't move, so I darted into a side corridor, still climbing, to get a closer view of them. I could see that just ahead of me the ice broke down to a more or less level area, quite a natural thing to find at the top of an escarpment. I still kept my eyes on the pteros, and for that reason I didn't see what was waiting for me at the top of the gully.

I was still staring at the birds, and they seemed to be still staring at me, when a sort of grunt brought me round with a rush. And there, believe me, I saw something that shook me to the marrow. I knew what it was, of course. Even if you've never seen a mammoth you can't mistake him. There he stood, an enormous brute, like an elephant, with long, curving tusks. He was covered all over with rough, reddish hair, like an old doormat, and the hair was steaming, as if he had been running. And did he stink? I'll say he did. He was a good twenty yards away, but I could smell him from where I stood. A little way behind him I could just make out a small herd of the big brutes.

What could I do? It's all right for you fellows to sit here and work out what you would have done had you been in. my place, but I could only think of one thing, and that was flight. Remember, I'd no weapon of any sort. There didn't seem to be any point in cluttering myself up

with a rifle in a country that seemed absolutely lifeless. 'Even if I'd had one I should have thought twice about taking on that big baby.

I turned to run. But I was in too much of a hurry. I slipped, and came down with a bang, knocking off a big lump of ice. It came down with a crash, shaking the whole place. It jolly nearly fell on me. If it had it would have crushed me flat. But I wasn't thinking then about the ice. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the mammoth start to move, and I didn't wait for any more. Believe me, I went down that gully like a lamplighter. Unfortunately, you can't run downhill on ice without spikes in your shoes, and I hadn't any. Over I went, and in a brace of shakes I was sliding down the hill without a toboggan. Pieces of ice came with me. Behind the ice I caught glimpses of the mammoth. He, too, had slipped, and was skidding, all ways up. He looked like a mountain of doormats. No it wasn't funny.

Of course, I yelled for all I was worth, hoping Biggles or somebody would come to my rescue, although I couldn't imagine what they'd do. Even as I skidded down the hill on my back I was wondering what would happen when the mammoth saw the aircraft. One charge, and all that would be left of it would be a few splinters and torn fabric. But I was past thinking by the time I got to the bottom of the incline. Just before I reached it I collided with a piece of protruding ice. I ricocheted like a bullet against the ice on the other side, and the shock nearly knocked me out. After that everything was a blur. I finished the slide in a cloud of icicles. The last thing I remembered as I was slowing down was the mammoth bearing down on me like three tons of death. That, by the way, is what he weighed—according to Donald's calculations. Being heavier than me he had more impetus, and this carried him past. Had he landed on top of me, obviously I shouldn't be here now. As he went past, the point of one of his tusks caught me in the leg, tearing it open and causing the wound that started this yarn. I bled like a pig, and the snow around me was like a slaughter house.

After that I must have passed out, because the next thing I remember was Biggles pouring brandy down my throat while Algy was tying up my kg. Of course, the first thing I thought of was the mammoth. "Where is he?" I asked.

"Where's who ? " inquired Algy.

"Big Bill," says I.

"If you mean Old Hairy, he's right beside you," said Biggles.

" Then he's dead? I gasped.

"He certainly is," answered Biggles.

Did you shoot him, or did he break his neck in the crash? "I asked.

Biggles looked at me for a moment as though I were mad. Then he roared with laughter.

It isn't 'often Biggles laughs like that, so I knew there must be something funny to laugh at. There was. It was the mammoth. But he wasn't in one piece any longer. He was all broken up—hide, tusks and innards. And the stink—gosh!

Well, you can guess what had happened. That old mammoth had probably been dead for several thousand years. He had been frozen in the ice, with some of his pals. The ice had at last melted, releasing him from his parky prison. The noise I heard must have been gas escaping from the putrefying body. He must have been poised very precariously on his pins, and when he fell, and the ice crashed down, he must have toppled over on the incline, when, naturally, he started to slide. The pterodactyls had been frozen in the ice in the same way.

The mystery was, why had the ice melted so suddenly? Well, we don't know for certain, but Donald formed a theory that it was due to volcanic disturbance, and heat, underneath the ice-cap. That, of course, would account for the rumbling noise we had heard. It is a fact that the temperature, by the thermometer, was sixty degrees. No wonder I had thought it was stuffy when I was climbing the hill. Donald wanted to stay and confirm this heat theory, but Biggles refused. The whole surface of the ice was fast turning to slush, and he took the view that the thing might freeze up again at any moment, in which case the wheels of our machine would be frozen in. So he would only stay long enough to give Donald a chance to take some photographs, and hack out the tusks of the old bull mammoth for a souvenir. Then we piled into the machine and headed for home.

Ginger yawned. "Well, that's all there was to it. It probably sounds all very silly now, but at the time, for a few seconds when I was sliding down the gully, it was quite exciting.

Now I'm retiring for a spot of shut-eye—goodnight, chaps."

IX

THE ADVENTURE OF THE LUMINOUS LILY

FLYING-OFFICER GINGER HEBBLETHWAITE, of Biggles's

Squadron, looked up from his breakfast herring as "Doc" Lorton, the station Medical Officer, came in, and pulled out a chair opposite to him.

"Dirty day, boys," observed the M.O. cheerfully, glancing first at the

rain-spattered mess window, and then along the line of officers, most of whom had finished breakfast and were killing time over their coffee. "You look like having an easy morning. I've just been listening to the eight o'clock news."

'Anything important?" inquired Ginger.

"The Japs have landed troops in Indo-China."

I wish 'em luck," grunted Ginger viciously. "I landed there once—but I was mighty glad to take-off again."

Flight-Lieutenant Bertie Lissie screwed his eyeglass in his eye and regarded Ginger quizzically. "Dr. Duck was with you I presume?"

"I can't think of anyone else who could have induced Biggles to risk a perfect), good aircraft in such a fever-ridden country, acknowledged Ginger, carefully removing the backbone of his fish.

" Ah-ha! A story," cried Henry Harcourt.

Go

ahead, Ginger."

Ginger shook his head. "Not this one," he declared emphatically.

Why not? "

Ginger thought for a moment. "Because it strains the credulity beyond reasonable limits,"

he decided.

"So much the better," persisted Henry.

"No. It wouldn't be fair." Ginger took a drink of coffee. "After all, although I've told you some pretty tall yarns in connection with our association with Dr. Duck, they have all, or nearly all, been supported by reliable testimony. I mean to say, the unbelievable has been made possible by the subsequent discovery of a perfectly natural solution. And so it was, to a certain extent, in this case; but much is still left to the imagination."

"Suppose you leave us to judge?" suggested Tug Carrington, amid a chorus of encouragement.

"Very well," agreed Ginger, putting down his fish knife. You've asked for it. Don't blame me if you don't like it. I'll give you the facts. After all, Biggles and Algy will confirm the tale if you find it hard to swallow—as you probably will." And this is the story he told : We went to Indo-China, as we went everywhere with Donald, with a definite object in view. But in this case, the information which Donald possessed concerning the objective was meagre in the extreme. In the heart of the jungle there was a lake, the approximate position of which was known to him. In this lake there was an island. On this island there grew—according to native rumour—a flower so remarkable that at first its existence seemed highly improbable—and Biggles didn't hesitate to say so. This flower was a lily.

But it was no ordinary lily. It glowed in the darkness. That is to say, it had the quality of being luminous at night. Most flowers that bloom at night are white, in order that the insects necessary for pollination can see them.

But this lily, apparently, had gone one better. It switched on a torch to make sure that it wasn't overlooked.

As I say, the idea of a self-illuminating flower strains the imagination somewhat; yet, as the Doctor pointed out to us, it was, in fact, well within the bounds of possibility.

Phosphorescence is a common phenomenon in nature. We can see it abroad in the firefly, and, in this country, in the glow-worm. It occurs in the gaseous discharges from bogs, and in the putrefying remains of vegetation. It is often found in the tinder-like substance of rotten trees. These are facts so well known that we needn't waste time discussing them. Donald's point was, if phosphorus could occur in nature, in things both dead and alive, animal and vegetable, there seemed to be no reason why it shouldn't occur in a tropical flower. Looked at in this light the thing became a reasonable possibility, and we went off to collect more substantial evidence.

We had a bit of a job to find the lake. There are a good many lakes in the country I'm talking about, and many of them embrace islands. Our difficulty was to find the right one. The natives, soaked in superstition—as natives usually are—wouldn't help us. Yet, in the end, it was this very reticence that took us to our goal. The farther away we were, the more ready were the natives to talk of the luminous lily. The nearer we got to it, the more silent and sullen they became. By using their attitude as a sort of "hot and cold"

clue, we eventually reached a lake where there were no natives at all, although there were indications that there had once been an extensive settlement. Biggles took this to be a good sign. When we spotted an island in the centre of this lake, and on the island the remains of a temple, it seemed pretty certain that we were on the right track. So we landed on the lake, taxied into a little bay which the island conveniently provided, and established our base camp.

I needn't describe the lake or the island. The lake was very pretty, and the island a typical tropical spice

island. It was low-lying, and entirely covered—I might almost say choked—with exotic vegetation . . . mipas palms enormous tree-ferns, orchids and lianas draping everything.

To some people these things might have spelt romance; to us, having had experience, they meant snakes, leeches and mosquitoes. They were there, too, and while they were in sufficient numbers to be a nuisance, they did not seriously affect our programme, so we can forget about them.

Having made fast, we landed and had a look round the island. It wasn't a big place, as islands go ; it was roughly egg-shaped, about a mile long and half a mile wide at the broadest part. The temple was just about in the middle, and it took us the best part of a day to hack a path to it. When we got to it there was nothing much to see, except some nice stonework, some of it very cleverly carved. It was a ruin, of course. There were no signs of it having been used for a long time, so we weren't particularly interested. We couldn't see any lilies. There was a nasty smell about the place, and I wasn't sorry when Biggles said it was too late to do anything that day, and we'd better get back if we wanted to reach the aircraft before nightfall. Once the path had been cut the going was easy, and in less than half an hour we were back at the machine, just as the sun was setting over the palms to the west, after having put in a pretty hard day's work. We had a clean up, a bite of food, and then sat down to discuss the next move.

A tropical jungle is one place in daylight, and another place after dark. At night, all sorts of creatures that have been in hiding all day come out to eat, drink, and make merry. I'm not pretending that to a well-armed expedition like we were there was anything frightening about it; I was conscious more of a feeling of depression. It may have been the presence of the ruins not far away, but I was aware of a feeling of sadness of desolation, that is rather hard to explain. I think the others felt it, too. The conversation lacked animation. However,

presently a young moon soared up over the palm fronds and the place looked more cheerful.

I was just thinking of turning in when Donald reminded us that the obvious time to look for anything of a luminous nature would be after dark. Whatever the colour, it would be more easily seen than in daylight. And this, of course, was true. All the same, I wasn't very keen on wandering about the jungle in the dark, when one might step on a snake, or come across a tiger from the mainland. There were plenty of crocodiles about, too, and while few wild animals will molest a man in daylight, after dark it's a different matter.

Talking it over, Biggles suggested a compromise. We would sleep for a few hours, and then, just before dawn, go back to the temple. We could have a good scout round until the sun came up, when we should be able to walk home in daylight. It seemed a sound scheme and we adopted it.

I slept all right, but at an unearthly hour Biggles woke us up and said it was time to start.

We each carried a weapon of some sort—not that we expected to have to use them.

Biggles led the way with an electric torch. Nothing happened, except the usual slitherings and rustlings in the dark bushes on either side, and in due course we could see the top of the ruin outlined against the sky.

Suddenly Biggles pulled up dead, staring at the temple, remarking that there was something about it that he didn't understand. Once he had pointed it out we could all see it. The ruin seemed to be flood-lit with a kind of ghostly glow. Keyed up with curiosity we went on, and there in front of us was the very thing we had come to see. But instead of one luminous lily there was a group—a score or more of them. They were all close together, and presented the weirdest spectacle you could imagine. How can I describe them?

Imagine an ordinary white Madonna lily about five feet high, but instead of a cluster of flowers at the head of the stalk, one big massive bloom. Now imagine that this flower is artificial, made, say, of white, opaque

porcelain, and illuminated from the inside by a pale green electric bulb. Every petal gave off the same ghostly radiance, and as we couldn't see the stalks, the flowers appeared to float in space. The

whole effect was beautiful, yet at the same time so unnatural as to give one the creeps. In a drawing room, or in a public garden, the flowers would have been fascinatingly lovely, but in such a wild setting they were disturbing, to say the least of it.

That was how they affected me, but Donald, being concerned only with the scientific aspect, was not upset. He gave a cry of excitement and dashed forward, and by the time I had got to the spot he was holding one of the flowers, smelling it. Instantly he staggered back with a 'cry of disgust, and was promptly sick. I could smell the things from where I stood. The stench was nauseating—like rotten eggs, only worse. Mind you, that's not an uncommon characteristic of jungle flowers, particularly those that eat insects, like the pitcher plants, of which there are always plenty in a tropic swamp.

However, Donald soon got over his fit of nausea and went back to the plants. We just stood and looked at them. There was nothing else to do. They were certainly a curiosity, but as far as I was concerned there the matter ended. There is a limit to the length of time one can stand and gaze at a flower, even a peculiar flower, without getting bored.

Not so with Donald, though. He was still agog with excitement, and talked enthusiastically about a discovery of paramount importance both to science and horticulture. He went boldly up to one of the flowers, and seizing it by the stem, snapped it off short. Instantly the light went out, as though an electric circuit had been disconnected.

Looking at the flower in the light of a torch, all we could see was a rather drab, wilting affair, a sort of pale grey in colour. The petals were like pieces of dirty rag. Saying something about the plant being a nasty, sticky brute, Donald threw the flower away, and then stood looking at his hands, as if the stalks had discharged a lot of sap, after the manner of daffodils when they are first cut. He made a joking remark about finding some water to wash his hands, whereupon Biggles, in a funny sort of voice said, "I should jolly well think so." For my part, I thought that Donald had somehow cut his hand, for his fingers were all gluey with a thick red fluid, like blood. It made me feel sick. Donald said nothing, but made haste to wipe his hands on some grass and leaves. There was no water handy.

At this stage Biggles suggested that as we had seen all there was to see, we might as well go back to the aircraft and call it a day. But Donald wouldn't have it. He said that at all costs he must have some of the bulbs to take home—assuming that these lilies had bulbous roots, like the rest of the lily tribe. It was a reasonable request; there seemed

to be no reason why he shouldn't have some of the bulbs, particularly as he was paying for the expedition. The trouble was, we hadn't got a spade with us. He tried scraping away the rotting vegetation with a knife, and although he got down a foot or more he still hadn't

reached the bulb. Getting fed up with scraping, he said he would go back to the machine and fetch the spade which we carried with our equipment. Biggles raised no objection. As a matter of fact, by this time the stars were paling with the approach of dawn, so there was no danger to be apprehended. It was then that we noticed that as the daylight grew, so the light of the lilies waned. That, I suppose, was only to be expected.

Donald stayed long enough to see the lilies go out. And as they went out the flowers died, and the stalks wilted. No doubt this was why we hadn't noticed them the previous day.

Well, Donald went off to fetch the spade, and Algy went with him. Biggles and I sat and talked, and, after it was broad daylight, we had another prowling round the ruins until Donald and Algy came back. Donald got straight on with the job while we sat on a fallen obelisk and watched. I imagined he would be about five minutes getting all the bulbs he wanted, but it turned out to be not as easy as that. Twenty minutes later, sweating like a slave, he was standing in a pit about a yard deep and still he hadn't come to the root, or bulb, or whatever it was.

Algy took a turn, and went at it with fresh vigour, while Donald stood on the brink of the hole, looking down. Biggles and I sat on the obelisk and watched the business without any particular interest. I think we were both getting a bit bored. Anyway, these were our respective positions when, a couple of minutes later, it happened.

Algy, who I fancy was also getting a bit fed up, drove the spade in with a good healthy thrust. Giving a terrific wrench, he flung out a spadeful of dirt—or what he supposed to be dirt. He threw it right at our feet, and as it touched the ground it seemed to spring to life. It wasn't earth at all. It was worms, long slender worms about the length of a lead pencil. They were bright red—scarlet. They didn't behave like ordinary worms, either.

They seemed to be filled with a frightful dynamic energy, bending their heads to their tails and then leaping into the air like springs, in the same way that the jungle leeches do. In an instant they were all leaping

high into the air. One hit Biggles on the chin, and hung on with tiny, needle-like teeth.

He let out a yell and tore it off.

I took one look at the hole and nearly went over backwards. You never saw such a sight in your life. Algy dropped the spade and shot out of the hole as though he'd been impelled by a catapult—which wasn't surprising, considering what came after him.

Worms ! Thousands of worms ! Millions of worms ! Vivid vermilion worms. Talk about move ! I should say we did move. You've never seen men move so fast. We all ran about a dozen yards and then turned to look at the worm-mine which we'd evidently struck.

Even then it didn't occur to us that we were in danger. After all, one doesn't expect trouble from worms, even lively worms like these. But when they suddenly came pouring after us like an avalanche I got the wind up. The hole was still throwing them up, as lava rolls out of a volcano. "Remarkable ", was all Donald had to say.

Biggles grabbed him by the arm. "Run!" he shouted. " Do you want to be eaten alive ? "

That did it. We set off down the path at full pelt, and believe it or not, those worms came after us, also at full pelt. Rifles were no use in a case like this—nor any other weapon that I can think of. We ran like hares, and behind us, like a scarlet tide, came the wormy army.

Although as I ran I was scared stiff I was aware of a feeling of absurdity. I mean to say—

fancy running away from a lot of worms ! But I ran, and mighty thankful I was when I saw the water, and the good old Wanderer, through the trees ahead of us. It didn't take us long to get aboard. And we weren't taking any chances to find out if the worms could swim. We cut the painter, and taxied out a hundred yards or so before swinging round to see what the worm battalions would do when they reached the water. They stopped at the edge, lining the water-mark like a lot of red seaweed.

"Well, Doctor," says Biggles, "I'm afraid you're not going to get your lily roots after all."

Donald admitted that, keen as he was to get the bulbs, he didn't feel like tackling the worms. So there was nothing else for it but to go

home.

On the way, when we got to the coast, we told our story to a Government official, and as luck would have it he was able to tell us something which might provide the explanation of our curious experience. Some years before he had been a Resident Magistrate in that very district. At that time there had been a big thriving settlement on the side of the lake.

Suddenly, for no reason that could be discovered, the village was beset by a veritable plague of crocodiles that made their headquarters on the island. The priests who dwelt in the temple, in an effort to cope with the scaly invaders, made a trap, which consisted of an enormous pit baited with a dead bullock. And sure enough the crocs poured into the hole until it was a seething mass of the brutes. And there, unable to get out, they died, but the smell

was so unbearable that neither the priests nor the people could stand it, and they moved to a healthier spot.

Donald told us that corruption can produce phosphorus, and this, he thought, must have erupted out of the ground in the form of fungi, taking the shape of lilies. There was no doubt that the lilies grew on the very spot where the crocodiles had been buried. And in the same way, the putrefying mass must have generated the worms. At any rate, there was undoubtedly some connection between the dead crocs, the worms and the lilies. If you can think of a better explanation, Donald would, I'm sure, be pleased to hear it.

"Well, that's the story." Ginger glanced at the window. "But the weather seems to be taking up—we'd better get outside in case we're wanted."

X

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SUSPICIOUS

VOLCANO

LUNCH was over. Biggles's Squadron was at "alert ", and the officers were enjoying a lull in operations by sunning themselves on the forms outside the mess door. They were in flying kit, ready to take the air within a minute of the alarm being sounded.

"By jingo ! I can't stand this sunshine—it's too hot," remarked Flight-

Lieutenant Angus Mackail.

Ginger considered him with sympathetic toleration. "You ought to try Mexico," he murmured.

"You been there?" inquired Tug Carrington.

Ginger nodded. "Too true. I've been to some warm spots, but I think I was hotter in Mexico than I've ever been anywhere. Mind you, I struck the hot weather. It isn't always so frizzling."

"Was 'Dr. Duck with you?" asked Ferocity Ferris, shrewdly.

Ginger grinned. "Yes, he was there. The affair was one of his biological outings."

"What were you looking for this time?"

"A volcano."

"And what did you find?"

Ginger sipped his coffee and set the cup down before he replied. "That's a long story."

"Did you, or did you not, find the volcano ? " demanded Henry Harcourt.

"If a big pile of rocks, explosions, sulphur fumes, smoke and fireworks make a volcano, then we found one," declared Ginger.

"Tell us about it," suggested Taffy Hughes. "I'm getting quite fond of Dr. Duck."

"There won't be time," protested Ginger. "The alarm may go at any moment."

"Never mind. Make a start, anyway. If you have to break off, we can hear the rest when we get back."

"Okay," agreed Ginger, and proceeded with the narrative: We had just finished a job in South America when Donald, referring to his book of words, discovered that he had a note, a recent note, of a volcano which had given the usual indications that it was about to throw a fit. That is to say, it was spitting sparks and blowing sulphur fumes, as these things do when they get tired of doing nothing. It might, the papers said, go up with a bang at any time. Donald wanted to have a

look in the crater while it was on the boil. So we went.

The volcano, by name Xactapetl, was on the western side of the country—that is, the Pacific side. For the most part this is pretty grim territory, rock and sand, sand and rock, with fertile valleys here and there. In the valleys there are a few scattered villages, inhabited, as far as I could make out, by a lot of lazy loafers, with big black moustaches and highly coloured bandanas. When they're not asleep they sit around and eat tortillas—

otherwise pancakes. I only ate one. They are supposed to be made of maize, but this one was made of

dynamite and pepper, mixed. Anyway, it took the skin off my tongue. But that's nothing to do with the story.

We landed on the open desert near a village called—I forget what it was called, but it doesn't matter. Ask Biggles if you want to know. The volcano stuck up out of the sand close and handy. There was no hotel in the village, so we slept by the machine, buying our food and stuff in the local market. There seemed to be quite a lot of people in the village and it didn't take us long to discover the reason. On the flanks of the volcano there were large pockets of very fertile ground, and this, I may say, is nothing unusual.

This land had been brought under cultivation, and in the ordinary way the farmers did very well out of it ; but owing to the rumblings of the mountain, these farmers, wisely, you may think, had retired to the village until the volcano cooled off.

I don't profess to know much about volcanoes, but this one appeared to be quite an ordinary specimen. It was quite a little fellow, as volcanoes go, about nine thousand feet high. A cloud of smoke hung like a streamer to the summit, and occasionally, when the wind blew in the right direction, we got a whiff of sulphur. Donald told us it was the normal thing for the breath of a volcano to smell of sulphur, so everything appeared to be in order. I ought to make it clear that this state of affairs had only lately come about. The volcano had been extinct for as long as the oldest inhabitant could remember, and it was a matter of surprise that it had come to life again.

Well, a day or two after we arrived we made our first survey flight. I shan't forget it in a hurry. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the heat was terrific. The sun blazed down turning the desert into a sea of shimmering gold, painful to the eyes. Near the mountain the heat was

flung back from the rocks, filling the air with unseen waves that tossed us all over the sky, although we went up pretty high. The air shook. The desert quivered, and the mountain was all distorted by mirage. This was due to the heat of the sun, and nothing to do with the volcano.

Our reconnaissance was a wash-out. All we saw was rock, more rock, and still more rock, with here and there wisps of smoke. The top of the mountain was hollow, like an old rotten tooth, but this was only to be expected. I saw no sign of lava. There were a few cacti, but otherwise no sign of life. So we came back after an uncomfortable flight feeling rather disappointed—at least, that was how I felt. Donald, always optimistic, took the view that the volcano wasn't quite ripe for a full scale blow-up, and suggested that we called the whole thing off—we could come back when the fun started.

To my surprise Biggles demurred. I thought he would jump at the chance of packing up, but he didn't. He said the mountain interested him. He was going to have another look, a closer look, at it in the morning. So the next day we went over again. It was hotter than i

ever—and was t bumpy? For the first time in my life I was nearly air-sick. Biggles took the machine low, at times skimming the edge of the crater, but there was nothing to see.

Once, when we were very low, something seemed to hit the machine. I paid no particular attention to it, but after we got back I saw Biggles prise something out of the engine cowling with a chisel. As he stood looking at the thing he had taken out, Donald remarked that it was usual for volcanoes to throw things up.

Biggles said, "So I believe, but I've never heard of them spitting things like this." We looked at what he held in his hand, and there was no need to look twice to see what it was. It was a flattened lead bullet. Biggles laughed and put it in his pocket. "I'm getting more and more interested in this volcano," he said, in a funny sort of voice.

"It looks as if someone doesn't like us being here," I said.

Biggles looked at me, and answered, "I shouldn't be surprised if you're right. People don't shoot bullets at their friends."

That evening we were sitting by the machine, talking about the bullet, and debating if we should make one more trip or go home when a piece of paper wrapped round a stone nearly hit Biggles on the head. It seemed to come from behind a clump of prickly pear. I made for the

paper, but Biggles was on his feet in a jiffy running like a stag towards the bush. A wild-looking desperado jumped out, waving a knife. There were two smacks in quick succession. The first was when Biggles's fist hooked the fellow under the chin, and the second was when the fellow hit the ground. Biggles came back with the knife in one hand and the bandit in the other. "I've found a souvenir," he said. "If we can make him speak we may learn something. What was written on that paper, Ginger ? "

I had already read the message, so I repeated it aloud. "Vamoose, gringo, or die."

Biggles laughed. I don't know if you fellows have noticed it, but the most certain way of getting a Britisher to do a thing is to threaten him with dire consequences if he does it.

Biggles said, "That settles it. We stay." Taking the knife, he whetted it on the palm of his hand, and then sort of tickled the prisoner under the chin with it. " Amigo " he says in Spanish, "you need a shave. Unfortunately, I'm no barber, so if my hand slips you're likely to get your throat cut. What about it?" The man looked a bit scared, but said nothing. He jumped, though, when Biggles snapped, "Who sent you to throw that stone at me—speak up?"

There is one advantage of dealing with a fellow who is accustomed to slinging a knife about. It's this. When you hold the knife, it doesn't occur to him that you may be bluffing.



Gentle persuasion.

Thus it was with this big stiff. He dropped on his knees with his hands in an attitude of prayer, and after calling on a number of saints to preserve him, asked Biggles to remember his wife and children. Biggles told him he was sorry about the family, but his only chance of ever seeing them again was to remember who had sent him to deliver the message. The man muttered, "El Cuchillo".

Biggles's eyes opened wide. "What-ho," says he. "So that's the kernel

in the nut."

We all knew who El Cuchillo was, because the village was plastered with notices offering five thousand pesos reward for his body, dead or alive. He was, it appeared, a tame Indian gone wild—if you get my meaning; and at that time he was Mexico's public enemy number one, making a comfortable living out of holding up trains and robbing farms. He also had a playful habit of waylaying lonely policemen, cutting off their feet and making them walk on the stumps. That's the old Indian idea of fun. From all accounts he was rather more slippery than an eel ; in fact, among the superstitious section of the half-breed population he had acquired a reputation of being first cousin to a spook. The truth was, the police didn't try very hard to catch him—they wanted to keep their feet on their ankles. Naturally Biggles asked what he had done to offend the bandit chief; but the prisoner relapsed into sulky silence and we couldn't get any more out of him.

At this moment, who should gallop up in a cloud of dust but the captain-commandant of the local garrison, with a troop of his men behind him. This was no accident. He had come to see us. He informed us, with that great show of courtesy for which Latin-Americans are celebrated, that our papers were out of order; but this, he felt sure, could be adjusted. In other words, we had overlooked the old Spanish custom of tipping him. It is only fair to say that this has been the fashion for so long that it is no longer regarded as sharp practice, but as an accepted custom; and it pays to fall in with it, for it saves a lot of trouble in the long run.

Biggles took the Capitan on one side and had a quiet word with him. They seemed to get on very well, and after an earnest conversation the Capitan went back to the village, taking our prisoner with him. When Biggles rejoined us he remarked, casually, that we should be leaving the ground early in the morning.

"Looking for what ? " inquired Algy.

"For El Cuchillo," answered Biggles. "I have come to an understanding with the Coital, so perhaps I had better explain. The idea is this. Just before dawn, the gaoler in charge of our late prisoner will allow him to escape. The fellow will, I feel sure, make a bee-line for his Indian boss. We shall be up topsides to see which way he goes."

"Where do you suppose he'll make for—have you anywhere in mind ? "
" asked Algy.

Biggles nodded. "Unless I'm very much mistaken he'll make for the volcano. That's where we shall find El Cuchillo. To look for him in the ordinary way would be like looking for a needle in a corn field. By watching the escaping brigand we ought to get a pretty good idea of the position of his hide-out."

Donald chipped in. "But surely the man wouldn't be such an absolute lunatic as to hide in something that might blow up at any moment ? "

Biggles grinned. I'm no betting man," he observed,

"but I'll wager my goggles that the mountain is no more likely to blow up than this desert. My guess is that El Cuchillo is the volcano. A few sticks of dynamite and a few handfuls of sulphur would be enough to make the farmers evacuate the district in a hurry.

Thus, the bandit would kill two birds with one stone. He would establish a safe hiding place for himself, and find food for himself and his gang at the abandoned farms. Not a bad idea."

"Now whatever made you think of that? "says Donald. "Did you suspect it all along?"

"No, but I suspected it when I saw herbage growing in the crater of the volcano," replied Biggles. I don't think you noticed that. I did, and as I can't imagine grass or anything else growing in the crater of an active volcano I put two and two together. That bullet sort of confirmed my opinion. When he saw our aircraft scouting round El Cuchillo got the wind up that we might see something, so he sent one of the gang to scare us away. It so happens that we're not as easily scared as all that. Well, let's turn in. I want to make an early start in the morning."

Next day we were up before the sun, and in a few minutes we were in the air—heading away from the mountain. By the time we were at ten thousand feet the sun was just tipping the horizon. Biggles then cut the engine and came gliding back, taking care to keep the machine between the sun and the mountain. It's almost impossible to look at a desert sun when it's low in the sky, so the chances of our being seen, particularly as we made no noise, were remote. On the other hand, as the sun was shining on the mountain we could see everything clearly.

As we glided on, Biggles divided the mountain into sections, and gave us each a section to watch, in the hope of spotting the escaping bandit. As it happened, it was my luck to see him, looking like an ant crawling up the face of the rock. I told the others where he was. Watching him, we saw him disappear into a canyon in the flank of the

mountain, just below the crater, and as he didn't come out of it we reckoned we had El Cuchillo's headquarters taped. That was all we wanted to know.

Still gliding, Biggles turned away, and presently I saw that he was steering a course for something I hadn't previously noticed. Coming across the desert at full pelt, kicking up a cloud of dust, was a troop of horse, and presently I made them out to be soldiers. They dismounted at the base of the mountain and continued on foot. Biggles dropped a message to the Capitan, and then, as it were, showed them the way. One doesn't often get a chance to watch a man-hunt from the front row of the gallery, so to speak, but this is what we did. When the troops got close to the hide-out Biggles dropped a signal flare right outside the bandit's front door. He went low to make sure, and for a minute or two things were pretty warm. By this time of course, the bandits knew what was in the wind, and they opened a brisk fire on us. When the troops came up they retreated, fighting, into the crater; but they hadn't a chance against the troops, who soon had them surrounded.

Seeing that it was all over bar the shouting we glided back to our camp, and from there watched the surviving desperadoes, a sorry-looking gang, being marched to the local prison.

Naturally, we thought that was the end of the business, but it wasn't. As soon as the farmers learned how they'd been bamboozled into leaving their homes on account of a few sticks of dynamite and some sulphur, and learned that we foreigners had been responsible for the round-up of the gangsters, they couldn't do enough for us. You should have seen the grub they brought in. They held a fiesta in the village at which we and the Capitan were guests of honour. The Capitan insisted that we took half the reward, and Biggles caused a sensation by accepting it and handing it over to the local hospital. After that the local hospitality became so embarrassing that we wound up the engine and set a course for home. Poor old Donald was a bit fed up that the volcano had fizzled out, but took some consolation from the fact that we had done a useful spot of work. Biggles promised to find another volcano for him another day.

"That's all there was to it—hello ! there goes the hooter." Ginger sprang to his feet as the alarm sounded, and ran towards his machine. "I'll tell you—" he shouted to Henry Harcourt, but the rest was lost in the roar of his engine as it came to life.

THE ADVENTURE OF THE HAUNTED

CREEK

THE officers of Biggles's Squadron looked round as the mess door opened and a stranger, in flying kit, entered. He raised his hand in a gesture of friendly salutation and joined the others at the fireside, where he dropped heavily into a chair.

Flying-Officer Ginger Hebblethwaite rang for the mess waiter. "Have a drink ? " he invited. "Where have you dropped in from on a dirty night like this ? "

The stranger ordered his drink and turned to Ginger. "I'm from K Squadron—night fighters. I chased a raider back over France. I got him, but with his last burst he put a hole through my tank. I thought I could just get back home, but I couldn't quite make it.

My petrol petered out so I dropped in here. Your fellows are putting things right—take about an hour to fix me up to get home."

"Why not stay the night ? " suggested Ginger.

"No thanks. I'll get back if it's all the same to you. I may have to do another show."

Ginger nodded. "From your accent I should say you're from Down Under," he observed.

The stranger smiled. "You're right. I'm an Aussie. Melbourne's my home. What made you spot it ? "

"I spent a week or two in Australia, once," returned Ginger.

"What doing—holiday making?"

"Not exactly." Ginger hesitated. "Matter of fact, I was doing a job. I say I, but Biggles, who is now the C.O. here, was in charge of the party. Algy Lacey, the fellow on your right, was there too. We were running an air charter concern at the time, and we had been hired by a scientist to take him round."

What did he want in Australia?"

Ginger laughed awkwardly. "It will probably sound a bit daft, but we were looking for a ghost—several ghosts."

It was the Australian's turn to laugh. "That's a new one on me," he declared. "Where were these spooks supposed to hang out ? "

" Dead Cow Creek, on the Cooper River."

Enlightenment dawned in the stranger's eyes. "Now I begin to understand," he said seriously. I've never been in that part of the country, but from what I've heard it's pretty grim."

Grim is the word. If anyone wants to make a collection .of skeletons, he can take his choice in Cooper Creek."

"Did you find the spook?" queried Henry Harcourt.

Yes, answered Ginger quietly. "We found several."

There was a general titter, but it died away at the expression on the Australian's face. "

Cooper Creek is nothing to laugh about—where I come from," he said softly.

"Suppose you tell 'em about it, Ginger, and settle their curiosity ? " suggested Algy.

"All right," agreed Ginger, and this is the story he told : First of all, you must try to form a mental picture of the part of Australia I'm talking about. Years ago, the Cooper was a regular river, flanked with lovely country and perfect pasture land. Stock-breeders found the place and several townships sprang up. Then, one year, the river dried up—as many of the Australian rivers are doing, which accounts for the big, unsettled areas. The water came back later, but the following year it did the same thing; and this went on year after year, gradually getting worse. Then came a year when the river didn't show up at all. This was serious, but the stock-breeders hung on. They hung on for nine ghastly years, and in all that time not one drop of rain fell from heaven, not one drop of water came down the river. The country dried out. It became a desert.

Everything died. The trees died. The grass died. The cattle and sheep died. The people died. Nothing could be done. What few cattle and horses were left were too far gone to be driven away. So they died. The surviving settlers fled from this land of terrible despair, leaving everything just as it was. That's the official account as near as I can remember it. Years afterwards the water came back, but then it was too late.

You can imagine what this place looked like after the settlers had left. I saw it, so I can tell you. After the drought came the wind. It blew the sand away from one place and piled it in another. The graveyard was uncovered, leaving the dried-out corpses exposed.

The bones of thousands of cattle whitened the landscape—thousands and thousands of bones, all twisted, as though

they were laughing at nature's last horrible joke. Round one dry water-hole we saw hundreds of cattle standing—with empty eye-sockets. They'd died on their feet. They'd been dead for years. They were just sun-dried hides stretched over bones. In some places the houses had been buried under sand; in others they were left sticking up on their foundations. The furniture was still there, left to the rats, owls and ravens. We walked through these rat-riddled ruins. They were just as their owners had left them--clothes in the wardrobes, pictures on the walls, books on the shelves, letters and papers on the tables. In one house we saw a piano; in another, a sewing machine. At night the moon shines in on broken mirrors, and a million tiny points of light that are the eyes of countless spiders. Rats are everywhere, and occasionally you see the skulking form of a cat or dog that had been left behind and had gone wild. That's how it was when we were there, and you can understand why the place got a reputation for being haunted.

At first, nobody took any notice of these rumours of ghosts. They were only to be expected. Then strange whispers reached the outside world. It was said that these ghosts talked. The first information about this came, admittedly, from native sources. Naturally, the blacks avoided this place of death like the plague, but one night a fellow lost his way and blundered into the district. When he was next seen he was nearly insane with fright.

All he could do was gibber about spook-talk. The fellow's boss, a white man, a gold prospector, took it into his head to check up. He, too, came back white and shaken. Not if all the gold in the world were there, he said, would he go back. He didn't see any spooks, but he heard them. And there the Matter rested until Dr. Duck decided to investigate. We went. I needn't go into details about the trip, which took a bit of organizing, but in due course we arrived and landed on the sand.

It was about noon when we unpacked, so having nothing else to do we had a look round.

I've already told you what we saw, and that was quite enough for me.

I didn't mind the empty houses, but the bones gave me the creeps. Everyone was depressed. You couldn't help being depressed in such an atmosphere of tragedy. When the others went to have a look at the graveyard I went back to the machine and thought of all the cheerful things I could remember.

Well, one doesn't expect spooks to walk in the daytime, so it was decided to try the luck in the moonlight—near the graveyard. I refused to go. The place gave me the jitters as it was, without spooks. So, after it got dark, Donald, Biggles and Algy went off; leaving me sitting by the machine. I made a bright fire, brewed a dish of tea, and tried to read a book. But it was no use. The horror of the place was in the very atmosphere, and I could only think of the poor people who had fought that terrible losing battle with nature.

The others had been gone about an hour, and I was sitting staring into the fire, when just behind me an anguished voice said, quietly but distinctly, "They're all dead."

I didn't move. I couldn't. I was petrified. I felt my hair curling on my head. I just sat, stiff and tense. Then another voice said, some way off this time, "Waterwater—water." This was followed by a peal of hysterical laughter right over my head. I looked up, but there wasn't a thing in sight, except the stars. That did it. I lost my head, and I may as well admit it. Taking the fire in my stride, I ran like a maniac, towards the graveyard, shouting for Biggles. And, believe it or not, something floated over me moaning, "Biggles". Let me tell you that voices in the air don't sound very nice after dark. I knew it couldn't be an echo, because, for one thing, it takes a background to make an echo—and there wasn't one; and for another thing, echoes don't move about, and these voices did.

In my wild rush I forgot all about the petrified cows at the water-hole, and I crashed into one. We went down together with a noise like a lot of dry twigs snapping. I got up breathing dust and shedding broken bones, and went on, until I could see the others coming towards me.

Biggles grabbed me by the collar. "What's the matter with you?" he rasped.

It took me a minute to get my breath, and then I told him.

"You're imagining things," he sneered. "We haven't heard a thing."

"Okay," I said sarcastically. "You come with me, and you'll hear plenty."

As a matter of fact we didn't have to get as far as the fire, which we could still see burning in the distance. As we approached it a shadow seemed to flit between us and the light, and a hollow voice croaked, "The Cooper's coming—the Cooper's coming." Just like that. Then, like an answer, from the direction of the empty houses, came the awful laughter, and another voice screamed, "They're dead—dead—dead."

Biggles pulled up, looking first at the fire, then towards the village. "Great Scott !" he gasped. " This is certainly uncanny." He started running towards the machine. We all ran.

When we got to it he went inside and came out with a twelve-bore sporting gun.

Donald said, "What on earth are you going to do with that? "

"I propose," says Biggles, in a nasty sort of voice, "I propose to find out what these spooks will have to say when they meet a dose of buckshot."

"But it's no use shooting denizens of the spirit world," says Donald.

We'll see about that," sneers Biggles. And just at that moment a voice right over our heads says, " Cooper's dead."

Biggles whips the gun to his shoulder and lets drive, blind, with both barrels—bang—

bang. You've never heard such a frightful shriek in your life, but there was no sign of any spook. It made my blood run cold.

Biggles put two more cartridges in the gun and set off towards the village. " I'll get to the bottom of this," he said, in that hard, tight voice he uses when he gets angry. •

We went on, me keeping close to Biggles, and all the time the most doleful voices, and sighs, and moans, could be heard, some near, some far, some moving, as though the creatures that made them were floating in space. However, we went on till we came to a building. It was a big barn. Biggles opened the door and took a look inside with his torch, but we couldn't see anything except rats, cobwebs and spiders' eyes.

"Let's go in and wait," says Biggles quietly, and we all went in and stood in a corner. We put the light out and waited. I don't mind telling you that I wished myself at home. For a time nothing happened. I suppose we'd been there about five minutes when there came, from over our heads, a noise that I can only describe as a ghoulish chuckle, followed by a harsh, rustling sound. Biggles switched on the light—but he was too late. We just got a brief glimpse of a dark shadow disappearing through a hole in the roof. Biggles took a snapshot at it, but again nothing happened except a lot of ghastly screams and cries from all round us. It was as though the spooks were mocking us.

"I've had about enough of this," says Algy—and I agreed with him.

Okay," says Biggles, "go by all means, but I'm staying here till I get my hands on one of these melancholy mutterers."

We went out. All this time Donald had said practically nothing. All he did was whisper to himself, "Extraordinary, really extraordinary." Presently we came to the house with the piano. Biggles, who had followed us, had a look up and down the street; then he handed me the torch. "Take a look inside that house," he said.

Well, as you can imagine, I didn't exactly chortle with delight at the prospect, but Biggles has a way of telling you to do a thing that makes you do it, whether you want to or not. I switched on the light outside the door and took a step to the threshold. Before I could even think, much less look, something like a ton of bricks hit me smack in the face. I went over backwards and the torch flew out of my hand. Biggles picked it up and turned the beam on me. "What was it ? " he asked.

"Don't ask me," I managed to get out, and then felt my face, which seemed to be wet.

Algy said something about me falling over with fright.

"Nothing of the sort," said Biggles. "Even if he did, there was no reason why he should scratch his face." He came closer, and we discovered that the wet stuff on my face was blood. The funny part of it was we couldn't find a wound; when I'd wiped it there wasn't a mark on my face. Then Biggles went into the room and the mystery was solved—at least, we discovered where the blood had come from, for there, on the piano, was a gory mess which we made out to be half a rat.

"Do spooks eat rats, Doctor ? " asks Biggles, apparently quite seriously.

"Not that I'm aware of," answers Donald. "Frankly, I've had very little experience of ghosts."

"In that case I shall have the pleasure of showing you one in a minute," says Biggles ; and from the way he said the words I knew he had the solution of the mystery in his pocket. He picked up the mutilated rat by the tail and flung it through the doorway on to the road. "Now, Ginger," he says, "you take the torch. When I say the word, switch the light on that rat. Try to shine the beam on it first go, or we may be too late." I took the torch.

Then came another spell of waiting. "This time we must have waited nearly half an hour.

Once or twice we heard voices in the distance, but nothing very close. Then suddenly, there was a kind of swish.

"Now," snaps Biggles. I switched on the light. Bang went the gun.

We dashed out, and there beside the rat lay—a raven.

Algy started laughing. "That's a good one," he chuckled. "We lay a trap for a spook and get the birdha—ha."

Biggles says, "I beg your pardon, but when I shoot at a spook I hit a spook.'

What do you mean?" says Algy, abruptly.

"That's the spook," answers Biggles, pointing at the raven. " Have you never heard of ravens talking? They talk as clearly as parrots—some people say better."

Well, you can imagine how that cleared the atmosphere. We laughed ourselves sick, for what, a minute before, had been tragedy, was now pure farce. We were still laughing when we went back to the machine and made a cup of tea to wash down a few biscuits.

The only one of the party who wasn't relieved was Donald. He was fed up because what had promised to be a first class mystery had turned out to be a simple prosaic event.

There was, however, one odd aspect to the affair. We were under the impression that the raven was normally a day bird; but there, for some reason or other, it had developed nocturnal habits, after the manner of the owl. No doubt there was a reason for that, had we cared to

prolong our stay to investigate the matter. The next morning we found plenty of ravens, sitting in dark corners.

It was easy enough to work out how they had developed the habit of talking, although this, of course, is entirely surmise. Either there were ravens in the district when the settlers arrived, or they were brought with them. No matter how they came, ravens were there, and one or more of them must have been caught and kept as a pet. Being great imitators, like parrots, they would learn to copy the sounds made by the people. Certain phrases may have been taught to them deliberately. Others they would pick up; and as towards the end of the colony such words as water, Cooper's coming, or Cooper's dead, or, they're all dead—referring to the cattle—must have been in common use, they would naturally be picked up. When the last settler had gone, and the birds had been left behind, they must have gone on croaking these words. The birds had bred, and the young ones had picked up the same sounds, and passed them from one to the other. That, I think, would be only natural. And so, eventually, we find a curious state of affairs where a colony of mimicking birds retain their tricks and habits after the people have gone.

Obviously, they made these sounds simply as sounds, without meaning, but one can well imagine what the effect must have been on the first ignorant native who heard them—or white men, for that matter. I was scared to death myself; in fact, we all were. Nine people

out of ten would have bolted at the first sound, without troubling to investigate. Had it not been for Donald's inquisitive nature, which took him there, and Biggles's obstinate determination to see the thing through, the voices might have remained a mystery for years. Anything might have happened. The birds might have gone to other districts and alarmed the people there; or they might have died, or forgotten the sounds they had picked up, in which case the mystery never would have been solved. The spot would have been put on the list of haunted places—all of which have a perfectly natural solution if only it could be discovered.

Ginger glanced at the clock, then at the visitor from Australia. "Well, that's all there was to it," he concluded. "If you like I'll walk along with you to see how our lads are getting on with your machine."

SHIRTS

UNDER half a dozen pairs of curious eyes, Flying-Officer "Ginger" Hebblethwaite, with a pair of nail scissors, carefully cut a small paragraph from a newspaper that lay open in front of him and put it in his wallet.

What's the idea ? " inquired Angus Mackail, looking up at Ginger's face. "What are you collecting—gardening hints or cooking recipes ? "

Neither," returned Ginger evenly. "Ever since I had the pleasure of travelling with Dr.

Duck I go through the papers every day looking for odd items of news that might be useful at some future date. If clippings are carefully filed, and cross-indexed, you'd be surprised how often they link up. Disjointed, they may mean nothing, but considered collectively they may provide the answer to a problem that has puzzled a lot of people for a long time. Donald used to do that, and going through his notebooks was a fascinating pastime. On more than one occasion they produced a useful harvest. I could give you an example. Did I ever tell you about the Golden Shirts? "

"They must have been awkward garments—what?" murmured Flight-Lieutenant Lord Bertie Lissie.

"I never wore one, so I don't know," answered Ginger.

"How about giving us the low-down ? " suggested Tex O'Hara. "We've got an hour to kill before dinner."

"Okay. Since it bears out my assertion about clippings, and shows what a little concentrated thought will do, I will." Ginger tossed the mutilated newspaper into the waste-paper basket, and this is the story he told : About ten years ago, long before I knew Dr. Duck, a small item appeared in the press. In effect, it was this. A man-eating shark had been found dead on the north-west coast of Australia. In its stomach was found a very queer object. The stomach of a man-eating shark usually does contain various hardware, and even jewellery, once the property of the unfortunate human beings on whom the brute had dined. But, as I have said, in the belly of this monster was found a very odd thing. Nobody could say for certain what it was, but it was thought by experts to be a piece of ancient armour. It was about eighteen inches long by twelve inches wide, and was composed of a number of thin, round metal plates laced together with fish sinews. The metal was gold—pure, fine, gold. It was just possible to make out

that there had been, on these thin round plates, a device of some sort, but the plates had been worn so smooth that it was hard to say what this device was.

The thing presented a pretty problem. To start with, i pure gold s rarely used nowadays. Being soft, it is hardened with other metals. This implied that the metal plates were of considerable age. I don't suppose anyone can say precisely how long a shark lives, but the gold was certainly older than the shark. Then again a clue was provided by the fish sinews which joined the plates together. It was claimed, reasonably, that the object couldn't have been in the shark's stomach very long, otherwise the gastric juices would have rotted the sinews, allowing the plates to fall apart. So much for the shark episode. The thing was soon forgotten, and it seemed unlikely that the mystery would ever be solved.

Five years later, a British destroyer operating in the Indian Ocean, hundreds of miles from land, came across a native canoe floating on the water. In it was the body of a man, a white man. He had been tanned brown by the sun, but it was certainly a white man. He had been dead about a week. He was wearing, over a cotton garment, a gold shirt composed of thin metal discs joined together with fish sinews. In short, it was precisely the same material as that found in the stomach of the shark. But this garment was intact.

In other words, the piece in the shark's stomach had not been torn off it, which proved that there must have been at least two such shirts.

It is unlikely that anyone connected the two events—except Donald. His filing system brought the two news items together, when it at once became apparent that they formed part of the same story.

Now Donald, when he got his teeth into anything in the nature of a mystery, was a methodical old bird. He went his own way about things, but his methods were sound ; and in this case he did a lot of research work before he brought the problem to us. His only data were the position where the canoe had been found and Admiralty charts. As you all know, the main ocean currents are constant, or fairly so, and over a period of many years, by means of sealed bottles thrown overboard from ships, the naval authorities have got these currents pretty well taped, both i in direction and speed. Thus it s possible to ascertain, within reasonable limits, where a bottle thrown into the sea at a given point will be washed up, and when.

By means of this data the Doctor had been able to work out the

general direction from which the canoe had come, and it stood to reason that an aircraft following that line—

that is the backtrail of the canoe—would pass somewhere near the place from which the canoe had started. This line passed near a good many islands—too many, in fact. There could be no indication from which of these islands the canoe had started—even if it had started from one of them. The fact that the man in the canoe had been dead for a week provided no clue, because we had no means of knowing how long he had been adrift before he classed out. Nor was the shark any help, because it might have been travelling round the world's oceans for years before it died and was washed up.

You might think, as I did when the subject was first broached, that by making a tour of all the islands in the Indian Ocean we should sooner or later be certain to strike the right one; but when Biggles pointed out that there are in the order of ten thousand uninhabited islands alone in the Indian Ocean that bright idea was knocked on the head. One way and another, although we had the general line of ocean currents to work on, it seemed a pretty hopeless quest. But still, gold is a powerful magnet, and we decided to have a stab at this peculiar treasure-hunt. I should say that Donald was attracted, not by the intrinsic value of any gold we might find, but by the white race that had access to such quantities of gold that they could make shirts out of it. The final arrangement was that we should spend three months on the quest. If at the end of that time we hadn't discovered anything we would give up.

And the day came when it looked as though we should have to give, up. We made our first base at Rangoon and spent a month flying over thousands of miles of ocean. There were plenty of islands, and we landed at a good many, but we saw no sign of what we were looking for. I didn't like to say so, but I was by no means sure what we were looking for—beyond a race of white men who wore golden shirts; and I, for one, didn't expect to see them lounging on a beach.

We made our second base at Penang and stayed there for five weeks, but we didn't have any better fortune there. Then we had a bit of luck, but it wasn't altogether luck. We should have missed the boat had it not been for Bizzles getting a brain-wave. We had got as far

south as Surabaya in Batavia, and as this is a proper air- port on the Australia run Biggles took the opportunity to give the engine a top overhaul and scrape some of the barnacles off our keel. One evening he went for a stroll in a bazaar, and he came back with that

thoughtful expression on his face that usually means he's on the track of something. It seems that he had got chatting to a Chinese trader, and from him he had bought something. It was a coin, a gold coin, and an old one at that. On it was stamped the letters V.O.C., and the date, 1717. Naturally, I asked what these letters meant, and Biggles answered that they were the mark of the old Dutch East India Company.

We still didn't get the hang of what he was driving at, not even when he made Donald get out his photograph of the gold shirt, which had, inset, an enlargement of one of the actual plates.

"I still don't see the connection," said Donald. Biggles didn't answer. He fetched a hammer, put the coin on a fiat stone, and beat it out to a disc the size of those that made up the golden shirt. We let out a yell, for now we were getting somewhere. The resemblance was too strong to be accidental. The gold shirts were made of coins, once the property of the old East India Company. That was a step forward. Algy remarked that he still couldn't see how this was going to help us, because there must have been hundreds of such coins scattered throughout the islands in the old days. But Biggles had another card up his sleeve. From the Chinese trader he had learned the name of the island where this coin had been picked up. By an odd coincidence its name was Gelden Island ; nobody knew why, but the association of Gelden and gold—which mean the same thing—was too significant to be overlooked. The island was a fair sized one, rocky and uninhabited—or supposedly so. The Chinaman had landed there in his junk for water, and he found the coin on the beach.

The next day Biggles sprang another surprise on us. He disappeared until lunchtime, and when he came back there was a twinkle in his eye. We asked him why. It turned out that he had been to the Dutch record office. There, with the help of officials, he had discovered that in the year 1718 an East Indiaman named the Van Husen had left Holland bound for the Far East. In its hold it carried the pay of the Dutch East India garrisons.

This consisted of eleven barrels of freshly minted gold pieces, dated 1717. There were several women passengers on board. The ship had touched at Java and was never seen again.

We were now getting hot on the trail, for the date, 1717, was, you remember, the date on our gold piece. It seemed a safe wager that the Van Husen had been driven off its course by a gale and thrown on to Gelden Island, or else the crew had mutinied with the idea of bolting

with the gold, and then wrecked the ship on Gelden Island. Obviously, our plan was to follow the course to Gelden. We went the next day.

Actually, there are eleven islands in this group. Nine of them are so small that we wasted no time on them. Of the other two, one was a fair size, and the other one much larger.

We passed straight over the smaller of these two, but it didn't look very promising, so we went straight on to the big fellow. This was Gelden Island. It was about nine miles long, shaped like a crescent moon, and perhaps five miles wide at the thickest part. It was obviously of volcanic origin, and rose in the centre to a height of several thousand feet.

The summit of this peak was a mass of black rock.

I should say that all these islands are uninhabited, being well away from the track of big ships. A Chinese junk or a native trader might call there for water once in a blue moon, otherwise nobody goes near them. We spotted several promising anchorages, so we landed in a tidy little palm-girt bay, and dropping our wheels, taxied up on the beach. It was all nice and quiet and very pretty—in fact, it was such a traditional South Sea island that I felt there simply had to be a treasure.

The sea was as flat as a skating rink, and the water crystal clear. Naturally, I had to have a swim, and I was standing on a rock, just about to dive in, when I saw something on the bottom. It seemed a funny shape so I went down to have a look at it. It didn't take me long to make out what it was. It was an old cannon—all barnacle-encrusted, and seaweedy, but undoubtedly a cannon. I called the others and they had a look at it. We had no means of raising it even if we had wanted it—which we didn't.

This told us that the ship—or at any rate, a ship—had been there, and Biggles took the view that as it had come into the bay the chances were that it had been brought in under control. If it had been wrecked it might have gone ashore anywhere, but under control the sailors would be certain to make for the best anchorage. The point was, where was the ship? As the cannon was on the bottom there seemed to be a good chance that the ship was there, too—or what remained of it. We decided to have a look.

Launching our collapsible canoe, we hunted until sundown without finding a sign of it.

We paddled slowly over the entire bay; we could see the sandy bottom everywhere; there were plenty of fish, but no ship. So we went ashore and made camp. Biggles sent me to collect some firewood, so I wandered along the high-water mark collecting pieces of driftwood, and in doing this I came upon a tiny cove—a bay within a bay, if you see what I mean? And there, sticking up out of the sand, was the very thing we'd been looking for—the skeleton of an old wooden ship. My yell brought the others along at the double, and we all agreed that we were getting along fine. As it turned out, we were getting on a bit too fine, had we but realized it. Don't ask me why, but we completely forgot the gents who wore the golden shirts. Maybe we were thinking too much about the treasure.

Maybe Biggles assumed that because the people were white they would be tame. I don't know. We didn't even mention them. We had supper in the light of the camp fire and made ready to turn in.

I was just putting down my bed under the old Wanderer's wing when, happening to glance in the direction of the vegetation, which came down to the edge of the sand, I noticed a curious sort of yellow gleam. It was obviously the firelight shining on something, and I couldn't imagine what it could be. Then it moved. Looking hard, I saw several queer gleams in the shadows; and then, in a flash, I realized what I was looking at. I slipped over to Biggles, who was talking to Donald at the door of the machine, and told him that the goldie-shirts were watching us from the bushes. Biggles dived into the machine and came back with four revolvers.

"Don't appear to notice anything unusual, but take cover," he ordered. "Keep something between you and the bushes in case they make a rush."

We moved into our places and waited. Nothing happened. Nothing moved. It was a nasty, tense moment. It wasn't for us to start the argument, if there was going to be one, but it was a bit grim just waiting there for something to happen. We stuck it for about five minutes, and then apparently Biggles got fed up, for he shouted, "Does anyone there speak English ? " There was no reply. He tried them in all the languages he knew, but there was still no sound from the bushes.

I'd begun to wonder if I hadn't made a mistake after all when there was a definite metallic jingle. There was no mistake about that. It was the discs of a golden shirt rattling.

Biggles had just said that we should have to try something else, and had half turned towards the machine, when there was a streak of yellow light as an enormous fellow broke cover. Biggles has had some close squeaks in his time, but he'll never have a closer one than he had then. I said he had half turned, and I mean that, literally. A split second later and his back would have been turned, and nothing could have saved him. His life hung in that split second, because, having only half turned, he could still see the jungle out of the corner of his eye. He ducked like lightning, and even then I thought he was too late.

The fellow who jumped out of the bushes was swinging an enormous cutlass. He must have started swinging it even as he jumped. It flashed like a metal prop starting up. Had it caught Biggles it must have cut him in halves. As it was, it swished over his head, missing his scalp by a couple of inches. I went cold all over. There had been no time to do anything. It had all happened in the twinkling of an eye.

Before we could move the affair had ended as quickly as it had begun ; and it ended in Biggles's favour. The very weight of the fellow's blow was his undoing. The cutlass carried him with it, swinging him round, and before he could recover his balance Biggles had stepped in and clouted him on the back of the skull with the thick end of his gun. The bloke gave a sort of grunt and went down in a heap. Biggles grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and dragged him towards the machine, by which time we had got our breath and were covering him with our weapons. As he dragged the limp prisoner past the fire it was pretty clear that he was a chief, for he was nearly encased in home-made armour—

of gold plates. We discovered later that he was, in fact, the local Big Bug, a sort of dictator. We also learned that he was no more loved than any other dictator, which probably accounts for the fact that no attempt was made to rescue him, although there was a good deal of talking in the bushes.

Biggles said, "Let's get out of this before there's a free fight. We don't want to hurt them, and we don't want to get hurt."

So we hauled the prisoner on board and taxied well out into the bay, followed by a load of old nails and pebbles, fired, evidently, from a blunderbuss. At the first streak of dawn we took off and set a course for Batavia. The prisoner had come round by this time, and you should have seen his face when we left the water. No doubt he thought he was on an ordinary ship.

Well, we told the story to the Dutch authorities, and there was gold shirt Number One with us to support it. We went back the next day taking three of the Dutchmen with us.

Speaking Dutch, they managed to establish contact with the castaways, and by nightfall we had the complete explanation.

It was very much as you'd expect. The gold-shirts

weren't the original sailors, of course, but they had a legend which told us everything.

Their forefathers had bolted with the ship, but foolishly ran aground in the bay where it became a total wreck. They'd salvaged everything worth having, including the gold, and then, fearing pursuit, had taken to the hills. And there the little colony, men and women, had lived ever since. The only use they could find for the gold was to make armour out of it, to protect themselves from attacks by cannibals from other islands. No cannibals had been seen for many years, but they wore the suits on state occasions. They were quite happy, but some years previous to our arrival they had decided to try to establish contact with the outside world. Three fellows had gone off in canoes, with long intervals between them, but none had managed to reach the mainland. We knew that one had been eaten by a shark, and another had died in his canoe. We didn't know what became of the other, but no doubt he had been drowned. Yet, although they never knew it, these explorers had succeeded in their quest for help, in that the golden shirts had reached civilization and were directly responsible for taking us to the spot.

Well, that's about all there is to tell. The castaways had never mixed with savages so they were still pure Dutch. We filed a claim for a percentage of the gold—which didn't belong to us, of course—and I must say the Dutch authorities behaved generously. They were still dealing with the islanders when we left. We heard later that some of them had gone over to the mainland ; others preferred to remain where they were, and started a proper colony under the direction of the Dutch Government, who sent out a lot of equipment, and put in a resident expert to advise on coconut and vanilla production. As a matter of fact, we looked in, in passing, a couple of years later and found quite a thriving colony.

You wouldn't have known the place—proper houses, and all that sort of thing. It was queer to think that had it not been for Donald's system of filing, years might have elapsed before these castaways were

discovered. That's the end of the yarn. Now you know why I've started a

little reference library of my own. It may come in useful when the war's over, and we're wondering what to do next. But that sounds like dinner—I shall have to pack up.

XIII

THE ADVENTURE OF THE INQUISITIVE

DODOS

IT seems to me," lamented Flying-Officer Henry Harcourt, "that chivalry in war is as dead as the dodo!"

Flying-Officer Ginger Habbleshwaite, without looking up from the book he was reading, answered, "Who said the dodo was dead, anyway ? "

Henry looked indignant. "Why, everybody knows that the dodo is extinct," he declared scornfully.

"Who do you mean by everybody?" inquired Ginger evenly.

"Well, the books say so. The extinction of the dodo is an accepted fact. No one has seen a dodo for a hundred years or more."

"When you smart guys have finished arguing," put in Tex O'Hara, "perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me, what is a dodo?"

"The dodo is a bird," replied Ginger.

"You mean, the dodo was a bird," corrected Henry. "I said is," growled Ginger.

"Whether it is, or was, what sort of bird are you talking about? " snarled Tug Carrington.

"How did it get that silly name, anyhow ? "

Ginger grinned. "Because the dodo is a silly bird, that's why. The name is derived from the Portuguese word doudo, meaning simpleton."

"Ha! Hark at the walking encyclopaedia," sneered Tug. "Tell us more."

Ginger frowned. "Since you choose to be rude about it I have no more

to say," he answered. "And talking of encyclopaedias, you'll find one in the library. I suggest it might be a good thing if you turned up the account of the creature under discussion, and enriched you poor poverty-stricken minds with a spot of information."

"I'll get it," declared Henry.

"I don't believe you know what a dodo is yourself," jibed Ginger.

Henry laughed. "To tell the truth, although I've often used the expression, as dead as a dodo, I don't know whether the blessed thing was the size of a tom-tit or a pelican. Just a minute . . ." He hurried off, and presently returned with the heavy book under his arm.

Putting it on the table, he skipped through the pages to the appropriate letter.

"Here we are," he announced. "Dodo." He read on, aloud. "Dodo, a bird, now extinct, once found on the island of Mauritius, a semi-tropical island in the Southern Indian Ocean, 9,500 miles from England and 550 miles from Madagascar. The island, then uninhabited, was discovered by a Portuguese navigator in 1505. On it was found immense colonies of a remarkable bird, seen nowhere else on earth. This grotesque creature, larger than a turkey, could not fly. It was ugly, bald, clumsy, with thick scaly legs, an enormous bulbous beak, and an idiotic expression. It started to die out as soon as the first settlers appeared on the island, and about the year 1700 it disappeared completely. One was sent to England in 1677 by Sir Herbert Thomas, who was travelling in those parts. One or two other living specimens were brought to Europe ; these were stuffed and mounted after death, but in some curious way even these seemed to have become extinct. All that is known of the bird is from early drawings and written descriptions, for, so far as is known, no specimen exists today, stuffed or living."

Henry closed the book. "That's all," he said. "What a queer thing that a bird should be found in only one place, and that it should die out so suddenly. I wonder if it was really like the description given in the book?"

"It was," answered Ginger calmly.

Lord Bertie Lissie, who had been listening to the conversation, started. "Here, I say, young feller, how do you know ? "

"Because I happen to have seen the creature," replied Ginger airily.

"But the book says it's extinct."

"That's what everyone thought, except Dr. Duck," declared Ginger. You see, Donald had a curious mind, and he was perhaps the only person to ask himself seriously, why should a bird become extinct? The bird couldn't fly, but was it not possible that the whole colony, when people settled on the island, had swum away to another, less noisy spot? If anyone else thought that, he didn't think the idea worth exploring. Donald did. He had a feeling that considering the thousands of uninhabited islands in the Indian Ocean, there was a chance of a few dodos remaining, hidden away on some lonely isle. That wasn't a question that could be answered by sitting at home in an arm-chair, guessing. Having studied the atlas, at no small expense he decided to make a protracted cruise over a few dozen islands which he had selected as the most likely spots to find a surviving dodo.

"The project held promise of being a glorified picnic. I mean, what better holiday could you think of than an aerial tour round the Indian Ocean? Who cared about dodos? I thought it was going to be good fun. And so it was—up to a point. But having gone so far I might as well tell you the whole story—you won't be satisfied, I suppose, until I do."

Ginger leaned back on the settee, put his feet on a chair, and continued : I needn't go into the course we plotted ; it would take too long. I forget the names of most of the islands we visited, anyway. We just cruised from isle to isle, landed, had a look round, and went on again. For several weeks we had no luck at all, but we had some good fun. We saw plenty of birds, sea-birds by the million—but no dodos. Not one. Only Donald's enthusiasm kept the quest going. I think the rest of us felt that a dodo-hunt was just a few degrees worse than a wild goose chase.

Still, we didn't care. Donald was paying the bill, the weather was fine, so everything in the garden was lovely.

Then one day we were making a fairly long hop back to Madagascar to refuel, when the weather turned nasty. I could see Biggles was getting worried. The ceiling clouded up ; it dropped lower and lower, so we couldn't get a sight of the sun to check our position. The sea was still dead calm, that oily sort of calm that you so often get before a big blow. The trouble was, we hadn't a big margin of petrol, and it wouldn't do to miss Madagascar. If we got off our course and missed

the island, we shouldn't strike land until we got to Africa—and we certainly hadn't enough petrol to do that.

Suddenly an island showed up on the horizon. I call it an island, but islet would probably be a more accurate description. It wasn't much more than a mile long, two or three hundred yards wide, and not much more than ten or twelve feet above sea level at the highest point. There was nothing on it. It appeared to be just a flat slab of rock, worn so smooth that it was reasonable to suppose that through the centuries heavy seas had swept right over it.

The appearance of this reef threw Biggles into a flat spin. According to the chart we didn't pass near an island, or anything like one. The obvious deduction was, therefore, that we were off our course. That wouldn't do at all. It was one of the few occasions that I've seen Biggles really upset. A good workman doesn't blame his tools, but he told me that he could only conclude that something had gone wrong with the compass. After all, he'd had a tremendous amount of experience and it hardly seemed likely that he could make a blunder over a simple compass course.

"There's only one thing to do," he decided. "I daren't risk using any more fuel. We shall have to go down and wait for the sky to clear. If the cloud breaks and we can get a shot at the sun, we should be able to check our position and plot a new course for Madagascar. We can't do anything until we know where we are." Algy agreed that it seemed the only sensible thing to do.

Donald, who was concerned only with his precious dodos, didn't care two hoots what we did. At that juncture, the last thing Biggles was thinking about was dodos. In any case, had there been any birds of any sort on the rock we should have seen them, because it was as bare as a billiard table. So down we went.

Biggles didn't actually land on the rock. With the sea like glass, there was no need. He landed on the water, and finding a sort of natural slipway, dropped his wheels and then taxied up on to dry ground. We were just getting out to stretch our legs when something happened for which none of us was prepared. It may have been a sudden change of temperature ; I don't know what it was; all I know is that the atmosphere thickened and in less than five minutes we were in a thick white fog. You don't often get fogs in those waters, and that, of course, is the danger : you don't think of them. When they come they come quickly, and usually find you unprepared.

Biggles stared at the murk. "Just look at that," he said. "I'm jolly glad I came down. I'd rather be here than up topsides in that pea soup. All the same, I don't like it. Fog usually means something. If a sea gets up we shall have the choice of staying here and being washed away, or making a blind take-off. Still, we'll talk about that if it happens. I think it's more likely that the stuff will clear off presently and give us a glimpse of the sun. We may as well make ourselves comfortable and brew a dish of tea."

Well, we all got out, and after a cup of tea, as there was absolutely nothing to do, I had a stroll round. There was nothing to see. There wasn't so much as a loose pebble, or an odd shell ; and this all went to confirm that the islet was swept clean by seas at high water.

There was this about it, however: the rock was smooth, and taking off would be a simple matter as soon as the fog lifted. But it didn't lift. Instead visibility got steadily worse, and by dusk the stuff was like a grey blanket. We had no means of finding out how thick it was or how far it extended ; but one thing was certain : we were grounded until the vapour shifted. We pulled the aircraft to the middle of the rock, in a position from which it would be possible to take-off when the stuff lifted, and that was all we could do.

Night fell and found us still there'

when I say

night I mean just that. I've never seen such utter darkness. The fog just hemmed us in like black ink. I said to Biggles, "If a sea gets up now we shall be in a nice mess.'

" I wouldn't worry about that," he answered. "It's unlikely that the sea will get up without a breeze, and a wind will blow this confounded stuff away." It turned out that he was right.

About ten o'clock, as there seemed to be no point in staring at the darkness any longer, we turned in. That is to say, we made ourselves as comfortable as possible in the machine, having arranged for turns of keeping watch. At sea you never know what is going to happen next, so, naturally, we fixed watches. Biggles took the first watch. All remained calm and he had nothing to report. Algy followed, and about four in the morning he woke me for my turn of duty. He was a bit worried, he said when he handed over, because the sea appeared to be moving. From time to time he had heard waves, or what he took to be waves, surging on the rock. What he couldn't understand was

that the sound was intermittent. It seemed reasonable to suppose that if the sea started moving it would keep on moving. We had a short discussion about it, wondering if we ought to report to Biggles, but in the end we decided against this. After all, if the sea did start to get up it would be a simple matter for me to wake him. The fog still enveloped us like a shroud, so there was nothing we could do, anyway.

I squatted on one of the undercarriage wheels prepared to pass an uncomfortable watch.

It was cold and it was clammy; in fact, it was beastly. I could see nothing, but from time to time I heard the same sound that Algy had evidently heard—a sort of swishing noise such as water makes when the tide comes in over a shingle beach; but there was no suggestion of wind, so I wasn't particularly concerned.

About half past five I felt a slight breeze fan my cheek, and I thought to myself, that's fine; here comes the dawn wind, and it will Wow all this muck away. I was right, too, for the breeze gradually freshened, and the sea began to hiss against the rock. There was no mistake about it. This was what we had hoped would happen, and in my satisfaction I got up to stretch my legs. In another moment I had tripped over something soft. I wasn't in the least scared, thinking that somebody had left some- thing, a coat or a blanket, lying about. Picking myself up, I had only taken a step when I kicked the thing again ; and I don't know what there was about it this time, but a feeling came over me that the thing, whatever it was, was alive. My hair began to stand on end, because I'd heard of octopuses coming out of the water at night.

My one comfort was that the fog was beginning to turn grey, and I knew that dawn was breaking. I thought I had better let Biggles know the state of affairs, so I groped my way to the cabin door and switched on the light. As it happened, Biggles was already moving.

He saw me come in, and said, casually, "Everything all right ? "

I answered, " I'm not sure."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Well," I said, "there's a breeze getting up and it's blowing the fog away; the sea is also on the move—butwell, I've just bumped into something that I don't understand."

Biggles raised his eyebrows. "What are you talking about? What is there to bump into ? "

"That's what I should like to know," I answered. "Perhaps by now it's light enough to see.

How about coming out for a look round ? "

Biggles didn't answer, but pulled on his sweater and followed me outside.

How shall I describe the sight that met our gaze? The mist had entirely dispersed, and a wonderful sunrise was turning everything to pink and gold. But we didn't pay much attention to that. We looked at the rock. We stared, and kept on staring. For covering the entire islet, from end to end, were thousands and thousands of white sea-birds, great ridiculous-looking creatures with enormous beaks and curly tails. There they stood, all staring at us, so thick that a jenny-wren would have found it hard to find a place to perch.

You should have seen Biggles's face.

Unless I'm dreaming," he said, "they're dodos. We couldn't find them, but it seems that they've found us. Wake Donald. Don't make a noise or you may scare the birds away before he can feast his eyes on them."

I went into the cabin and woke the others. They followed me out, Donald nearly beside himself with excitement. Out came his notebook, and we watched him in his element for about twenty minutes. Biggles then pointed out that he was sorry to disturb the party, but as the sea was rising fast we ought to be on our way before we were washed away. He suggested that as all the dodos looked alike Donald had better capture one and take it into the cabin, where he would be able to study it at leisure. Donald agreed, and selecting a bird, grabbed it by the neck. It made not the slightest protest.

Biggles waved his arms, and addressing the flock, told them to push off.

The birds utterly ignored him. They just stood there like a lot of dignified old ladies, looking at us with expressionless faces. We shouted. We jumped. We yelled, but still they didn't move a step or flap a wing. Then we remembered that they couldn't fly.

Biggles went into the cabin, and returning with a gun, blazed away over their heads.

They didn't bat an eyelid.

Algy roared with laughter, but Biggles, after a glance at the sea, stopped him. "This isn't in the least funny," he said seriously. "If those birds refuse to move we are very soon going to be in a jam. Look at those waves ! We've got to clear a runway, and we've no time to lose. Come on, get busy."

I got hold of a bird and started pushing, but another simply walked into its place. We all pushed ; we heaved and shoved, but all we did was get ourselves hot and bothered. As fast as we cleared a spot fresh birds just strolled on to it. Algy said, "We shall have to shoot the

lot, and throw them into the sea." Biggles answered, "Don't be a fool; we should need a million rounds of ammunition." I could see that he was really worried. "I've been mixed up in some crazy adventures," he said,

but this beats the lot. I'm dashed if I know what to do, and that's a fact."

Looking round, I saw that two or three of the birds had managed to climb up on our elevators. One, looking frightfully important, was strolling along the hull. I pushed it off.

Algy grabbed one that was trying to balance itself on a tail plane. He managed to get it off, but the thing dug its toes into the fabric and took several square inches with it.

"Steady on," shouted Biggles, "they'll tear the machine to pieces if you go on like that. If they manage to get on our wings, we're sunk." And this was obviously what some of the dodos were proposing to do ; apparently they thought there was no point in staying in the crowd while there was plenty of elbow room on the aircraft.

By this time the sea was really rough, so there was no longer any question of getting the aircraft on the water. It would have been dashed to pieces against the rock. Our only hope was a land take-off, and as the waves were already sweeping the rock in the lower places, we had only about five minutes to find an answer to our problem. A more fantastic predicament would be hard to imagine.

Then Biggles got one of his brain-waves. He shouted, "We've one chance—the engine.

Get round to the tail. I'm going to start up. I'll rev the engine and blow

the birds away with the slipstream." So saying, he climbed into the cockpit and started the engine, while Algy and I fought our way through the birds to the tail, and lay across the planes to keep them down.

We managed to hang on, but either the noise or the blast of air was too much for the dodos. The slipstream blew them into heaps, like piles of feather cushions. As long as I live I shan't forget that picture—dodos on their backs, sliding on their faces, with their silly little wings stuck out. In a minute or two we had a clear run of a hundred yards or so. It wasn't very wide, but it was wide enough, provided the birds didn't come back before we could get off. The runway was, of course, behind the machine, so we hauled the tail round until the nose was pointing in the right direction. Then we fairly fell into the aircraft. As soon as Biggles saw that we were in he jammed the throttle wide open and away we went. I held my breath, for some of the birds were beginning to close in again, and we had only to hit one, travelling at that speed, to cause us to turn several somersaults.

We got off by the thickness of a pig's bristle. I had a fleeting view of a sort of avalanche in front of us, then something hit me on the back of the head like a sack of flour. I got a glimpse of a dodo, feathers flying, vanishing through the door, which in our haste had been left open. Donald started bleating, "It's gone—it's gone," and I knew that he had lost his darling dodo. I need hardly say that we didn't go back for it. Looking down, the runway had already disappeared. The islet was once more a solid mass of dodos. Where they'd come from we don't know; where they went, if they went anywhere, we don't know either. Speaking personally, I don't jolly well care. Biggles took a shot at the sun, picked up our course, and a couple of hours later we were in Madagascar, finishing up with about a pint of petrol in the tank.

Ginger got up and stretched. "Well, that's all," he said. "But if anyone ever tells you that the dodo bird is extinct—just refer him to Biggles. What he thinks of those dizzy fowls is nobody's business."

XIV

THE ADVENTURE OF THE COUNTERFEIT

CRUSADERS

FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT LORD BERTIE LISSIE, Of Biggles's

Squadron, sauntered into the officers' mess, glanced at the little group

of pilots sitting round the fire, and then picked up the daily paper. He read the headline, screwed his monocle more firmly in his eye, and read it again.

I say, you fellows," he remarked, "I see the beastly Nazis have taken jolly old Rostov."

"What about it ? " inquired Tug Carrington.

Bertie looked pained. "Well, I mean to say, you know, Rostov is a deuced important place. They call it the doorway, or gateway—or something—to the Caucasus. We don't want the Nazis there, no fear."

"Why not ? " inquired Tug dispassionately.

Bertie polished his eyeglass. "Well, if they get through Caucasia, the next thing they'll be trotting down Iraq, or Persia, to Egypt—yes, by Jove."

They'll never get through the Caucasus," put in Henry Harcourt, confidently.

"Why not?" demanded Bertie.

"Because it's nothing but rocks and thins, all ups and downs. In fact, nobody knows quite what is there. "

Algy Lacey stepped into the conversation. "I'm not so sure about that," he murmured. "

The Germans may know a good deal more about the Caucasus than a lot of people suppose."

"What gave you that idea ? " asked Bertie. "Have you been there?

Algy nodded. "Yes, I once spent a few hours in the country, with Biggles and Dr. Duck.

Ginger was there, of course. If you ask him nicely perhaps he'll tell you about it."

"What took you to the Caucasus, anyway? " prompted Tex O'Hara.

Ginger answered. "We were looking for some lost crusaders."

"Come off it," jeered Tug. "The crusaders all passed out hundreds of years ago. We were even taught that at my school."

"Maybe your school was right, Tug," returned Ginger, slowly. "But I wouldn't be too certain of it."

"Did you find any crusaders?"

Ginger nodded. "Yes, we found some ; and I must say they looked like the real thing. They carried swords with religious inscriptions, and even wore the Cross of St. George on their tunics." Ginger glanced at the clock. "We've still got a few minutes before dinner; if you like I'll tell you all about it."

"Go ahead," invited Tex.

Ginger settled down, and this is the story he told : In accordance with my usual practice in telling you of our adventures with Dr. Donald Duck, I had better give you a rough idea of this place they call the Caucasus. I don't suppose you know much about it, but don't let that worry you, because very few people do. I knew absolutely nothing, until Donald produced a memo from the Soviet authorities—Caucasia, in case you didn't know, is one of the Russian republics, or rather, a cluster of republics with unpronounceable names. In fact, it's a queer place altogether, and it's hard to believe that it's in Europe. Actually, it stands bang in the middle of the biggest lump of land on earth, a sort of hub, as it were, of Europe, Asia, and Africa. The tops of the mountains are permanently capped with snow, but in some of the valleys, particularly in the south, the climate is semi-tropical, producing peaches, apricots, grapes and oranges.

While the rest of the world has been spinning along, the Caucasus has stood still, drawing into itself all the outcasts and refugees of the world. An ancient Greek army was lost there; so was a Roman legion; nobody knows what happened to them, but it is said that their descendants are still there. There are also tribes of Mongols, Arabs, Turks, Medes and Persians, Armenians—in fact, all the flotsam and jetsam of three continents.

There are white races, yellow races and brown races, all tucked away in their own valleys, with their own laws, customs and religions. One thing they worship in common is freedom. They won't stand for interference, and for that reason travellers have given the region a wide berth.

But of all the amazing rumours that have come out of i this amazing land, none s more astonishing, and perhaps romantic, than the one that concerns the lost crusaders. Who they were originally, and how

they got there, nobody knows; but there is ample evidence that the descendants of at least one party of crusaders dwell there. Little is known of them. They stick to the old customs, wear the Cross on their tunics, and carry swords that were certainly made in the remote past. The oddest thing of all about them is their religion. They seem to have got things mixed up, for they worship St. George, the patron saint of England.

So much Donald told us. He had got his information from Russia, and, as you will have guessed, his bright idea was to track down these alleged crusaders with a view to clearing up the story—that is, to determine if it was fact or fable. He approached Biggles with the proposition, and while Biggles was not exactly infatuated with the scheme, pointing out that it seemed a dangerous country for flying, he agreed to go. So we went—having, of course, got permission from the Russian authorities. The nearest regular airport was Baku, famous for its oil-wells, and there we made our way, the idea being to explore the territory from the air, and, if possible, locate a landing-ground somewhere near the middle of it.

Actually there was no landing-ground in the mountains—or if there was we couldn't find it—but in the southeastern corner, in a deep valley open at one end, there was a lake; and a very pleasant lake it turned out to be, with wild flowers and flowering shrubs making the banks look gay. All around, looking magnificent against a flat blue sky, were towering mountains, from which the melting snow formed little brooks that ran down into the lake. It was, in fact, as pleasant a spot as you could hope to strike in a day's flight, and I should have been content to potter about there for a while doing nothing in particular. Unfortunately, when Donald was on the trail of something he could think of nothing else, and his mind was set on lost crusaders. For my part, supposing that even if they existed and we managed to find them, they would look like anybody else, I wasn't particularly interested.

Now, you'd think that such a pleasant place would be fairly swarming with people, but as far as we could make out there was nobody there. We landed, moored the old Wanderer to the bank, sat in the sunshine and talked things over. Donald wanted to explore the district on foot, but Biggles wasn't keen on leaving the aircraft; nor did he relish the idea of splitting up the party—that is, leaving somebody with the machine while the others went off on a crusader-hunt. He pointed out that there seemed to be a good chance of the exploring party becoming lost in the mountains.

As it transpired, our problem was answered for us. As we sat there on the bank, a wonderful figure, I might say a gorgeous figure, appeared on the hillside. He wore a tall green turban, and a long, yellow silk robe decorated with blue stars, pink moons, and goodness knows what else. On his feet were scarlet slippers. Think of the pictures you've seen of Aladdin, or Ali Baba, and you'll have a rough idea of this magician—for that's what he turned out to be. He came right up to us, and bowing low, with tremendous gravity addressed the doctor, evidently assuming from his top hat that he was the head man of our party. I didn't recognize the language, but Donald did ; it turned out to be Persian. Between Persian and Arabic they managed to hold a conversation. From this we learned that our visitor—I forget his name—had once been court astrologer to a prince of Persia, but failing to forecast an eclipse of the moon, he lost his job; he was banished, and was now living in a cave on the hillside, whither he now invited us.

You never saw such an amazing place as that cave in all your life. You wouldn't have known that you were in a cave, for the walls were hung with tapestries and carpets.

Glorious Persian rugs covered the floor, and innumerable brass lamps hung from the ceiling. heaps of coloured cushions provided seating accommodation. Scattered about were weird instruments for casting horoscopes. It was a fascinating place, and I must confess that I was enthralled. We sat on the floor round a great dish of fruit and resumed the conversation—at least, Donald did. From time to time he translated for our benefit.

Naturally, he soon turned to the subject uppermost in his mind—the crusaders; and this is what he learned.

The crusaders really existed. Not only that, but by an extraordinary stroke of luck we had landed quite close to their valley. They were queer people—so Ali Baba asserted—and had a sinister reputation for putting to death any civilized people who fell into their hands. Such people were instantly beheaded with one of the great two-handed swords carried by the crusaders. To approach the place dressed as we were would be equivalent to suicide, but if we disguised ourselves as orientals there was a chance that we might get through. In this our host was willing to help us. He would lend us costumes, and we could pretend to be holy men from the east. The aircraft would be quite safe.

This sounded fine—but there was a snag. Even Ali Baba wasn't quite

sure of the way to the valley where the crusaders lived. There were valleys everywhere, and if we accidentally wandered into the wrong one we might find ourselves in the hands of a tribe of Tartars, who also had a colony in the district; in that case we should undoubtedly be murdered. This didn't sound so good. However, there was a solution to the problem, and this, too, lent an air of romance to the proceedings.

I need hardly say that there were no newspapers in this wild region, but there was, it seemed, a sort of news service, a service that had been operating for hundreds of years.

At regular intervals a travelling news-vendor marched through the mountains, shouting the news for the benefit of anybody who wanted to hear it. These men were privileged; they could go anywhere without fear of injury; in return for their work they were provided with food. These fellows, as well as knowing all the local gossip, knew where each tribe had its headquarters. Such a man was due to arrive at Ali Baba's cave the following day, and he usually stopped to eat a dish of rice. Ali Baba would speak to him on our behalf, and try to persuade him to show us the village of the crusaders. But he would certainly not do this if he knew we were British. The only possible way of overcoming that difficulty would be for us to dress up like holy men, members of a religious order sworn to perpetual silence. This would get over the language problem.

Now Biggles has, and always had, a horror of dressing up, or otherwise making himself look ridiculous. He refused to be party to such proceedings. But, he said, that needn't prevent us from going. He would taxi the aircraft to a hiding place under the rocky bank of the lake, keep out of sight while the news-vendor was passing through, and so await our return. As the news-vendor would not be returning that way he advised me—on the quiet—to drop a scrap of paper at intervals as we walked along. This would mark the trail, so that when we came back alone there would be no risk of our losing the way. It was obviously a sensible suggestion, and the plan, as I have outlined it, was adopted.

The next morning Biggles retired to the aircraft, and we saw no more of him for a little while. The rest of us dressed up like three of Ali Baba's Forty Thieves, seated ourselves with the old hermit at the entrance to the cave, and awaited the arrival of the news-monger. He turned up as per schedule. We heard him coming long before he reached us.

Every mile or two he would stop, clang a bell which he carried, and bawl the news to the wide world. He was an engaging person in the matter of appearance—tied up, it seemed, with an amazing number of old garments, most of them falling to pieces.

Over a bowl of rice AE Baba told the prearranged story about us—at least, so I assumed

; at any rate, he talked an awful lot in a tongue unknown to us. At first the news-monger appeared to jib at the idea, but eventually he gave way, and we were given to understand that everything would be all right. The result was that when the news-man girded up his loins and proceeded on his way, we trailed along behind him in single file, looking as serious and as holy as possible. I brought up the rear, as it was my job to lay the paper trail, and this I did, dropping a scrap every ten yards or so, using an old newspaper for the purpose.

I needn't tell you about the journey. I've done some queer hikes in my time but this was the oddest. We walked for some hours, skirting the flank of a big mountain, sometimes crossing meadows bright with flowers, and at other times plunging through gloomy forests of

cedar and pine. The scenery was superb. Every so often the news-vendor would stop,



The Crusaders show themselves in their true colours.

ring his bell, shout the news and then go on. It seemed to me to be a complete waste of time, because we didn't see a soul. Eventually we turned into a valley which our guide, by signs, indicated was the one we were looking for. It turned out that he was going into the valley himself, so he led the way. Donald was quite excited, and Algy and I were pleased at what promised to be a satisfactory end to our quest.

It was the end of our quest and no mistake. It was jolly near the end—

for us of all quests.

We were striding along a sort of narrow defile, between high rocky walls. Donald went to the front, bustling along in his usual energetic style. Algy followed close behind, and I followed Algy. Inside the defile our guide had stopped for something, and now brought up the rear. There was nothing odd about this, because in a defile there is no possibility of taking a wrong turning.

Suddenly the defile opened out, and there before us stood four tall, fair-haired, blue-eyed crusaders. Dressed as you see them in pictures, they made a striking picture, leaning on their big swords, with the Cross of St. George on the front of their white tunics. Algy whispered to me that they almost seemed to be waiting for us, to which I replied, that just as Ali Baba had known of the coming of the news-monger, so must these fellows have been aware that he was due to arrive. I hit nearer to the truth than I supposed. They were waiting for him all right—and for us.

The crusaders stood in a sort of little semicircle, in the manner of a reception committee.

When we were within a few yards of them each man produced from under his tunic an automatic pistol. The effect was so incongruous that I nearly laughed. Looking back over my shoulder at our guide, I got a nasty feeling in the stomach when I saw that he, too, had produced a pistol, and had covered us. He sneered maliciously, "Keep on walking, spies." He spoke in English with a strong accent.

To say that we were flabbergasted would be to put it mildly. For a minute we stared at each other. Then Algy blurted, "What's all this about ? "

You should know that," answered one of the crusaders. "We know what you're doing here. Well, now you've found us. That is excellent. We also have found you, and we shall see to it that you cause no further inconvenience to the Third Reich.

"Third Reich ? " I gasped. I couldn't get the hang of the thing at all.

The Professor was the first to spot the truth. "They're Germans," he said, "and I can guess what they're doing here. This is a nest of spies who, taking advantage of local legends, have disguised themselves as crusaders to cloak their real activities."

"Wonderful," sneered one of the crusaders. "As if you didn't know."

"I give you my word," I said, "that we knew nothing about it. This gentleman is Dr.

Duck, the famous biologist. We were looking for the genuine crusaders."

"No doubt," snarled the crusader who seemed to be the leader. Then he added, in German,

"Let us make an end of them and get it over."

I could hardly believe my ears—or my eyes—when they suddenly backed away, taking aim at us with their pistols. Remember, we weren't at war with Germany then. What shook me most was the fact that our guide was dearly one of the gang. He had played his part well, for no suspicion of the truth had occurred to us.

Well, there we were. What could we do? We hadn't a weapon between us. Nobody could have foreseen such a state of affairs. It was obvious that the Germans had decided that we were British agents sent out to locate their headquarters, and to deny that would be a sheer waste of time. In any case, now that we had rumbled their racket, they certainly would not let us go. It would be hard to imagine a tighter spot. The head crusader took deliberate aim at Donald ; I could see his finger tightening on the trigger and I thought it was all up.

A shot crashed out. I looked at Donald. He was still standing 'there. What was more remarkable, he seemed to be all right. Then I saw that it was the crusader who had been hit. His legs suddenly folded up under him and he went down in a heap. My brain couldn't

keep pace with this, and while I was still wondering vaguely why the chap had shot himself—for that's what I thought had happened—a voice spoke. It was close, and unperturbed. Somehow Biggles had arrived on the scene. He spoke in German, and I knew enough of the language to make out that he was telling the others to drop their guns.

They looked as amazed as we were. One by one they allowed their pistols to fall to the ground. Biggles stepped out from behind a rock, and without taking his eyes off the Germans, told me to pick up the pistols. This done, he ordered the Germans to turn about and march away down the valley.

The tables were now turned with a vengeance, and the Nazis could do nothing but comply. They marched off. When they had gone about

fifty yards they broke into a run.

Biggles said, "Come on, let's get back. Those fellows have probably got some pals in the village. We've stirred up a hornets' nest, and the sooner we're in the air the better."

We set off at the double. Before we were out of the defile there were shouts behind us, and by the time we got to Ali Baba's cave snipers were taking shots at us. We didn't stop, but ran straight on to the water's edge. And there, flat on his face, lay Ali Baba. His green turban had rolled off, and I noticed that he, too, had flaxen hair. Donald would have stopped, but Biggles merely grunted, "He's a Hun, like the rest of them; I had to crack him on the skull. Let's get into the air."

It was warm work at the finish, for by the time we had the engine started the counterfeit crusaders were pouring down the mountain path. One or two bullets hit the machine, but they did no damage. We were soon out of range, heading for Baku. As soon as we landed Biggles told the Soviet authorities what was going on. What happened to the Germans we never learnt—the Russians don't talk about these things—but we could guess. We didn't go back, so we still don't know if there are any real crusaders in the Caucasus.

Apparently, what had happened after we had set off with the guide was this. In the cave, Biggles, who never misses anything, had noticed a length of electric wire against the wall. That aroused his suspicions. He said nothing to us, but he had a feeling that something was wrong, and that was why he had stayed behind. It was also the reason why he told me to leave a trail, so that he could follow us if necessary. As soon as he saw us start up the trail he crept back to the cave, and heard Ali Baba talking to somebody in German, on the telephone. That made it clear that he was no Persian, but a German agent, probably a sentry posted to keep a watch over the lake. Putting two and two together, he saw that we had walked into a trap. If further proof was needed it was soon forthcoming, for out came Ali Baba, armed with a rifle. He crept down to the water near the aircraft, obviously with the intention of shooting Biggles. He didn't suspect that Biggles was stalking him, and he was just covering the aircraft when Biggles hit him on the head with a lump of rock. Then, picking up the rifle, Biggles set off after us hoping to overtake us. Had it not been for the paper trail he would never have found us, but by following it he caught up with us in the nick of time, as I have described.

Well, that's all there was to it. All's well that ends well, but there's no doubt that we had a close squeak. Had we been shot by the Germans,

and we certainly should have been had Biggles not noticed that tell-tale piece of flex, nobody would ever have known what happened to us. We don't know how long the Germans were there, but they may have gathered some useful information; but for our visit they would have learnt a lot more. I doubt if Biggles ever did a more useful job of work—but here he comes now; I'd better dry up.

XV

THE ADVENTURE OF THE GREEN HORSE

"WHAT with dugouts, trenches, funk-holes and air raid shelters, civilized people are in a fair way to become troglodytes," remarked Henry Harcourt gloomily.

Tug Carrington started. "What are they ? " he questioned suspiciously.

"Troglodytes? People who live in holes in the ground.

"You mean—like rabbits?"

"That's the idea."

"Are there such people ? "

Henry shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. There used to be. I believe there are mountains honeycombed with ancient troglodyte dwellings in North Africa, but I fancy the old trogs themselves are all dead and gone."

"Don't you believe it," declared Ginger, rousing himself from the deck chair in which he had been basking after a two-hour patrol. "The trogs may have departed from the ken of civilized men, but they're far from dead. On the contrary, they're very much alive. I know. I've seen 'em."

" Really? " Henry became interested. " Where? "

"North Africa, but a good deal farther south than the well-known underground burrows in Libya. Matter of fact, those we saw were in the Hogger Mountains, sometimes called the Roof of the Sahara."

" We? " queried Henry.

" Biggles, Algy, Dr. Duck and myself," explained Ginger.

" Ah ! now I understand. So you once went on a troglodyte-hunt?"

" Oh, no," disputed Ginger. "I didn't even know the little blighters existed. Actually, we were looking for a green horse."

"Ha ha," sneered Lord Bertie Lissie. "That's a good one ! What had the horse been doing to acquire an emerald hide—eating too much grass ?
"

No. I doubt if there was a blade of grass within five hundred miles of where this particular quadruped was supposed to browse."

"Was it there when you got there?" demanded Taffy Hughes.

Ginger shook his head. "That's a long story." "Spit it out, kid," invited Tex O'Hara.

Ginger laughed, and settling down in his chair, continued: A green horse would, you will agree, be a zoological curiosity, so it was hardly surprising that Dr. Donald was interested. The facts concerning this equine phenomenon were, to say the least of it, slim. For one thing, they rested entirely on native rumour, and that isn't always to be trusted. However, Donald took the view that even with the most superstitious natives there is rarely smoke without fire, so he decided to look into it.

It seemed that the thing began with the discovery of an Arab wandering about alone in the Libyan desert, near a place called Insalah. He was spotted by a French aircraft out on reconnaissance—this, of course, being before the war. The pilot made a signal to his base at Fort Flatters, with the result that a car was sent out to pick up the lost Arab. He was in a pretty bad way, and he did, in fact, die ; but before passing out he made a rambling statement about being followed by a green horse, which caused his own horse to bolt and throw him. This would certainly account for his predicament, because Arabs don't normally stroll about in the desert alone on foot. Not unnaturally, the French thought he was raving, and paid little attention to the story.

Some time later a caravan crossing the desert northeast of Timbuctu was startled by the sudden appearance on a ridge of a jade-green horse. The entire caravan of about a hundred persons saw the animal, and it put the wind up them. When it turned and galloped away most of the Arabs were inclined to think that they had seen a mirage but one thing a mirage doesn't do is leave footmark;. This unnatural steed did, and examination revealed that they came from the direction of the Hogger Mountains, which comprise a group tucked away in the

fiery heart of the Sahara. These mountains have been seen and visited by one or two armed expeditions, but for obvious reasons little is known about them. It isn't the place you'd choose for a holiday; the heat is terrific, and they haven't got the water laid on. Some of the peaks rise to 11,000 feet. A few nomadic Arabs have been known to frequent the valleys, but they're a wild lot and don't encourage tourists. It is only natural that such a place should bristle with fanciful tales, and before we started we heard tell of ancient ruins, deep unexplored gulches, emerald mines, and similar attractions.

Now, in case what I am going to tell you strains your credulity, I had better tell you about the big troglodyte settlement in the Matmata Mountains, near the coast. People have known about this for a long time ; it was described by classical writers a couple of thousand years or so ago, and according to at least one traveller, it is still in existence. In this amazing community, surrounded by sheer desert, some 50,000 human moles are supposed to dwell, as they have dwelt since prehistoric times, in a honeycombed mountain. They still use flint arrowheads and axes, which is fairly conclusive proof that they haven't advanced much in thousands of years. It is assumed that they first took to the earth to escape marauding bands on the hunt for slaves; at any rate, they're as nervous as rabbits, and disappear into the bowels of the earth at the approach of strangers. They live entirely on snails, lizards and scorpions. To discourage visitors, they roll down rocks from the peaks—an old trick, but still effective. Their customs are disgusting. For instance, when one of them dies, his arms and legs are bound together; the body is then set up on a mound and pelted with rocks by the entire party to shouts of jolly laughter.

We knew nothing of this—at least, I didn't; we weren't even thinking of troglodytes when we set a course for the Hogger Mountains in search of the green gee-gee.

I've seen some sand in my time, but nothing like that which I saw in the neighbourhood of these mountains. Some of the dunes, measured by our altimeter, were nearly 2,000

feet high. The desert looks like a mighty ocean suddenly frozen in the middle of a storm.

The two most outstanding features of the mountains as we approached them, were the sharpness of the peak; and the amazing clearness of the air. Wind has worn the sandstone of which they are composed to points as sharp as needles. Altogether, it was a grim-looking spot. There was no sign of life, and nothing like a horse, green or otherwise.

Our only chance seemed to be to land and look for tracks.

After hunting round for some time Biggles found a fairly fiat stretch of sand, and managed to put the old Wanderer down right side up. I don't think any of us quite realized what the heat was like until we stepped out. Talk about an oven ! I could feel my skin cracking. Well, we put a dust cover over the engine, had a bite of lunch, and then, as Donald was impatient to be off, we started on our first survey on foot. There was no question of walking over the rock—it would have blistered our feet ; we chose one of the deepest canyons where there was a certain amount of shade. The ground under our feet was silt, or rather, rough sand that had disintegrated from the mountains. The silence was frightening ; the air was absolutely still, and you could have heard a pin drop a hundred yards away.

Well, we walked on for some time, looking about us, lost in wonder at the awful solitude of the place. For some time we saw nothing—nothing, that is, except rock and sand—and then, at the spot where another canyon crossed ours, what should we come upon but the tracks of a horse. I could hardly believe my eyes—nor, I think, could the others. It was hard enough to believe the horse story before we started, but now, having seen the place, it seemed fantastic.

Biggles stood and looked at the tracks while he lit a cigarette. Then he said, "No matter how hard it may be to believe, these tracks were undoubtedly made by a horse. You will observe that there is only one set, and they lead in the direction of the open desert, so if the animal came back, it didn't come this way.

The next point is, since no animal could live here long without water, if we trace these tracks back to their source we shall find water. I don't think the tracks are recent, but it's hard to judge, because it is a fact that in these deserts tracks can remain for hundreds of years."

Donald, who was pale with excitement, agreed, and started off at a brisk pace up the second canyon, following the tracks, evidently determined to trace them to their source.

We followed, and nothing more was said for some minutes, when we got our second shock. We came upon a ,great pile of shells—snail shells. The heap was fully fifty feet high, and ran like a ridge for a hundred yards or more. It must have taken millions and millions of snails to make that stupendous pile.

Biggles turned to Donald. "What do you make of that, Doctor ? " he

questioned. "I must admit that it's got me guessing."

" Ah, says Donald, smiling, "this is where two heads are better than one. I think I know the answer to this puzzle. This is the refuse heap of a tribe of troglodytes. I once saw the same sort of thing, farther north. No doubt the entrances to the burrows will be higher up

; the people simply throw all their rubbish out of the front door." It was then that he told us what I have already told you about troglodytes generally.

When he had finished we all looked up, and it's a good thing we did, for on the way down was a volley of rocks. We dived for cover, and the rocks hit the ground with a thud.

"They don't like us, evidently," remarked Biggles. Turning to the doctor he asked, Is there any reason for alarm—I mean, are these people likely to attack us ? "

Donald thought for a moment. "I don't think so," he decided. "They resent interference, but if we could

make contact with them we should be able to convince them that we mean no harm. But let us for the moment continue following the hoof marks. Perhaps the troglodytes will leave us alone if we ignore them."

We took his advice and went on, keeping a watchful eye on the ledges above us. Once or twice I thought I saw little brown faces looking down at us, but I wasn't sure, because it often happened that the sandstone had been worn into grotesque shapes, resembling human beings, animals and reptiles. As it turned out we hadn't much farther to go.

Rounding a bend, what should we come upon but a big cave, not very high but thirty or forty feet across the entrance. Into the yawning mouth of this cavern the trail led.

"Well," observed Biggles' "this looks like the stable. Frankly, I don't think much of it."

"Nonsense," answered Donald. "Having come so far I'm not going to turn back now."

Biggles shrugged his shoulders. "As you like," he said. It's your party."

So we all trooped in. Donald switched on his torch, and we found ourselves in a much bigger place than we had supposed. The floor was level sand, but the top towered up like the roof of a cathedral. There was nothing to see except the hoof-prints, and there wasn't a sound. We continued to follow the trail, which presently turned into a side entrance leading to another enormous cavity.

Suddenly Biggles stopped. "Just a minute," he said. "What's that ahead ? "

We all pulled up, staring. There was something there, but it was hard to see what it was.

Very slowly we went on a few paces, and then I heard Algy gasp. I probably gasped too, for facing us was a sight that would make your blood run cold.

Sitting, or rather squatting, in a vast semicircle, were lots of little men, row after row of them all in the same position. It was rather like looking at the auditorium of a theatre from the stage. Not one of them moved. They just sat staring at us, and we at them.

Donald, who didn't lack courage, went on slowly, and we followed, although my inclination was to bolt.

As we drew close it was possible to make out that they weren't men at all, but statues, all looking as though they had been cut out of jade. There they sat, with their hands and feet tied together, their chins on their knees. Donald reached forward and touched one. "

Remarkable," he said.

"You mean the carving, Doctor ? " suggested Algy.

Donald chuckled. " Carving ? These are not carvings, my boy. They're petrified corpses, human beings that have been placed in, or under, some petrifying liquid. You can see the same sort of thing in limestone caves in England, although there the deposit is grey. Here it is green. Yes," he went on, pointing, " there's the spot where the liquid seeps through the roof. And that's the place, unless my eyes deceive me, where the hoof-marks end."

"Then that explains the mystery of the green horse," put in Biggles, rather sharply. "The animal was made to stand there—alive—so that it could be petrified ; but after getting a coating of the green dye it managed to break loose and escape."

"That, undoubtedly, is the answer," agreed Donald.

I thought it was time to give my opinion. "What about getting out of here? " I suggested.

" It strikes me that if we stay we may find ourselves under that green shower-bath.

"Ginger's right," said Biggles quickly. "Those troglodytes must be responsible for this. I fancy we've struck their cemetery. This cave is no place to be caught in. Let's get out."

I think we all suddenly realized our danger, and no one stopped to argue—not even Donald. We turned round, and we were only just in time. Creeping towards us as silently as ghosts, with stone hatchets in their hands, were the most dreadful-looking people I have ever seen in my life. They were small, without hair or eyebrows, and as far as I could see, without teeth. Their little pink tongues kept flicking over their lips as if in anticipation

of a tasty meal. Had they rushed us at that moment I hate to think what might have happened. As it was, as soon as they realized that we'd seen them, they stopped, and there we all stood, they staring at us and we stannng at them.

"Keep your heads," said Biggles, quickly. "If we do the wrong thing there's going to be a mess. We must avoid hostilities if we can. I fancy they're as jumpy as we are; they don't know whether to come on or go back. It's touch and go either way."

An idea struck me. "I wonder if they've ever heard a mouth-organ," I said.

" What ! " exclaimed Biggles. "Have you got one?"

I told him that I had. As a matter of fact I had bought a beauty in Algiers on our way over. I had really bought it for a souvenir, because it was decorated with Arab writing. It was still in my pocket.

"Try a note or two," suggested Biggles. "It can't do any harm."

Very slowly I took the mouth-organ from my pocket and put it to my lips. Then I blew—

hard. In that clammy silence the result even startled me, so I don't wonder that the poor little trogs were scared. Did they run? They let

out one scream of terror and made a wild scramble for the exit. So did we. I kept close behind them, blowing up and down the scale for all I was worth. Once in the main cave the trogs didn't run into the open; they disappeared like a swarm of big black beetles into a narrow fissure which presumably led to their dwellings higher up. Needless to say, we didn't follow them, but shot out into the open. Fresh air has never seemed so sweet to me, nor has the sky ever looked so blue.

Even then the danger wasn't over, for all the way back along the canyon rocks kept rolling down, and we could see the little blighters keeping pace with us along the ledges.

But when we got to the aircraft and switched on the engine, that did it. You couldn't see the trogs for dust. All the same, we didn't sit around. This, clearly: was no place for a picnic, and we were all glad to be out of it—particularly as the mystery of the green horse had been solved. What happened to it we never learned, but either the poor beast attached itself to a caravan or died of thirst in the desert. The Arab who said that the horse had chased him was wrong, of course. The unfortunate animal, being domesticated, was probably pining for human society. But that's just surmise. In a few minutes we were in the air, heading north for civilization.

Ginger stood up. "Well," he said, "that was my one and only experience with troglodytes, and I hope it will be the last. If living underground makes people look like those poor little blighters looked, it will take more than air raids to turn me into a human rabbit. But here's Biggles; let's go in to dinner."

XVI

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SILENT DEATH

" ANY news? " Flying-Officer Henry Harcourt put the question to Ginger, who was leaning against the fireplace in the officers' mess reading the evening paper.

Ginger folded the news-sheet and tossed it on to the table. "Nothing to shout about," he answered. "The abominable Dr. Goebbels is bragging that Germany has a secret weapon.

"

" Bosh ! " sneered Henry, and sundry other noises from different parts of the room indicated what the members of Biggles's Squadron thought about the Nazi boast.

Ginger looked round with an expression of mild reproach. "Why these vulgar expressions of contempt ? " he queried. "Is there any reason why Hitler shouldn't have a secret weapon? After all, you may be pretty sure that we've got one or two surprises up our own sleeves."

"I'll believe in a secret weapon when I see it," grunted Tug Carrington.

"By that time it may be too late for you to do anything about it," remarked Ginger. "In any case, by the time you know about it it will no longer be a secret weapon. This has been a war of secret weapons, and more, no doubt, are on the way. If I know anything about history, there always have been secret weapons. The German magnetic mine was a secret weapon. Our radio-location was a secret weapon. Why, even animals and insects know the value of a secret weapon."

"Here, just a minute, young fellow-me-lad," put in Lord Bertie Lissie. "You aren't by any chance suggesting that jolly old gnats and things sit down and work out new ideas ? "

"Well, I'll admit I didn't exactly mean that, but I don't see why not," returned Ginger slowly. " Scores of animals, birds, fish and insects, have what must have been originally a secret weapon. A snake injects poison, the skunk squirts stinking stuff, the armadillo is really a living tank. All of them must at some time have taken other creatures by surprise."

"But all these things are known now; they're no longer secrets," argued Henry. "Animals are no longer capable of developing secret weapons. Only men can do that now."

"I call that a bold statement," declared Ginger. "How do you know what wild creatures are doing? Are you in a position to assert that there is not, in some tropical jungle, even at this moment, a creature that is slowly but surely developing some deadly weapon?"

"No, I'm not," confessed Henry.

"I should jolly well say not," replied Ginger. "Had you done so I would soon have squashed your argument, for, as it happens, there is ample proof that it is not beyond the _power of wild things to produce lethal weapons. I know it to my cost."

"What did it cost you ? " inquired Bertie.

"It jolly nearly cost me my life." Ginger jerked his thumb in the direction of Algy Lacey.

"If you don't believe me, you ask Al5y. As a matter of detail, the Silent Death, as the thing was called, put our friend, Dr. Duck, in hospital for two months, and, incidentally, put an end to our biological cruise. For some time it was touch and go with him."

"The Silent Death?" whispered Henry. "That sounds terrific."

"It was terrific," agreed Ginger. "Even now I can't think about it without a shudder."

"Say, come on, what are you waiting for ? " put in Tex O'Hara. "You know you'll have to tell us the story, so why not begin?"

Ginger laughed.

All right," he agreed, "I hope

you'll find it interesting. We did." And this is the story he told : Just before war became pretty well certain, strange events were happening on the West Indian Island of Hispaniola—that 'Dart known as the Dominican Republic. With war-scare headlines filling the front pages of the newspapers on this side of the Atlantic, it is likely that these events passed almost unnoticed in Europe. Even those people who noted the little paragraphs concerning the Silent Terror—as the thing was first called—were more concerned about what was happening on their doorsteps, than the death of a few poor ignorant negroes in a distant tropical island. They certainly did not realize that the world was facing an even greater peril than that unleashed by the Nazis. We—that is, Biggles, Algy, Dr. Duck and myself—didn't realize it, even when we were on the spot.

What might have happened dawned upon us only after the Silent Terror had been silenced for good. But let me take the events in their correct sequence.

We had returned from Africa with Dr. Duck to enable him to attend an important scientific meeting in London. We had nothing definite in view, and it seemed likely that we should be at home for some weeks—in fact, until Donald decided to make another trip. This came sooner than we expected. One evening he turned up at Biggles's rooms and arranged on the table a number of newspaper clippings cut from American and West Indian newspapers. These clippings, which referred to incidents spread over several months, all started off by telling the same story. In a certain district of Dominica cattle had been found dead in mysterious circumstances. There is nothing new in cattle dying in mysterious circumstances ; cattle die from all sorts of

diseases; but the remarkable—not to say horrible—thing about these poor beasts was that after death their bodies were found to be entirely drained of blood. This ghastly business always took place at night.

The first obvious answer to this sinister mystery was that the animals had fallen victim to the notorious blood-sucking vampire bats that are common in the West Indies and Central America. But the vampire bat doesn't kill. It takes a meal from the victim, animal or human being, without awakening him. Cattle, goats and even humans are subject all their lives to attack; by these pests, apparently without ill effect, although too much of it certainly weakens the victims. In short, the thing is so common that it is accepted as a matter of course, as we take wasp-stings in this country.

The next point is, the vampire doesn't drain its victim. Obviously, it would be impossible for a creature the size of a vampire bat, which is only about four inches long, to consume the entire contents of an animal the size of a cow. Nor could it be a question of attack by a swarm of vampire bats, because they operate singly. What creature, then, had done the mischief? Nobody knew, but the natives, in their superstitious terror, ascribed the Silent Death to supernatural causes. Time went on, and things got worse instead of better. More and more cattle died, and it was clear that if the plague persisted it was only a question of time before the island was completely denuded of cattle, in which case the natives would be faced with starvation. Moreover, the plague might spread to other islands, for already the outlying farms were affected.

The thing came to a head when first one native, then two or three, died in the same mysterious circumstances as had the cattle. They were also struck down during the hours of darkness. Stark terror descended on the island. People went mad trying to keep awake.

No one went to work. The sugar plantations were abandoned, and all the time no one had the remotest idea of what was doing the damage. Such was the state of affairs when Dr. Duck decided to take a hand. We were soon on the spot, and as we were now faced with a first class mystery, we were all agog to solve it. We started by hiring a house, a flimsy native affair, from a negro, to serve as our headquarters. Of course, we had no doubt that there was a perfectly reasonable explanation of the revolting business.

We got a shock, though, when, having parked the Wanderer in a lagoon, we went on mule back to the centre of the stricken district. The first white investigator, an American newspaper reporter, had

been killed the previous night. He was a tough fellow, and like most Americans, full of confidence. Armed with a shotgun and a torch, he had gone out, laughing, to settle the matter. When day dawned his corpse was found stretched out on a bank, just as if he had dropped off to sleep. I need hardly say that this put a different complexion on the whole thing. It's one matter for a poor ignorant negro to lose his life, but a white man, armed into the bargain, was a horse of a different colour.

"I'm not usually an alarmist," remarked Biggles, quietly, as we discussed the situation, "

but this isn't a job to be tackled lightly. That American journalist was no fool. There's nothing to prevent us from making the same mistake. We shall have to be careful."

Now the spot where the American had lost his life turned out to be the very place where the first cattle had been killed. The owner of the farm—a mere clearing in the forest—

had also fallen victim shortly afterwards, and no doubt this was the reason why the American had chosen the spot. There was reason to suppose that the creature—if creature it was—had its lair near that place. One significant point must be mentioned.

Since the

Silent Death had struck at human beings it had no longer molested cattle, and this fact suggested that it had acquired a taste for human blood. This in itself was a remarkable thing, as Donald pointed out, because creatures of the wild rarely change their taste from choice. It is well known that a lion or a tiger will switch over from cattle to human beings, when they're known as man-eaters ; but this isn't altogether a matter of choice; they only do that when they begin to get old and lose their teeth, when they no longer have the strength to pull down a buffalo.

Briefly, our plan was this, and it was based on the fact that there were several of us together, whereas the American had been alone. We should afford each other mutual protection. We decided to go to the place, a sort of dell, where the American had lost his life. Donald would sit in the open, offering himself as a bait. We would sit around, close at hand but out of sight, and watch. Biggles was all against this, but Donald, pointing out that he was the scientist of the expedition, insisted; and when he makes up his mind there's no shaking him. We

were to sit on the fringe of the jungle a few yards away, not together, but a short distance apart, the idea being that we should be able to watch Donald from different angles. But we were taking no chances. Having no idea of how the Silent Death struck its victim, Biggles insisted that ever?: fifteen minutes he would say, quietly but distinctly, All's well ". This was to be echoed by every one of us in turn. In this way we should be able to keep a check on each other without moving. If anyone should see anything suspicious, or feel himself being attacked, he would, naturally, give the alarm.

For weapons we chose shotguns instead of rifles firing a single bullet; they would give us a much better chance of hitting the mark in the dark. We also carried hunting knives.

At sunset we went off, and by nightfall we were in position. A wonderful moon, nearly full, gave us a good view of Donald, calmly sitting out in the open.

I squatted under a tree-fern on the edge of the jungle, with the clearing in front of me. I couldn't see the others but I knew where they were.

Let me say at once that this was a more creepy business than it may sound. When darkness settles on a jungle, any jungle, all sorts of things start to move about, mostly small things, of course, but even small things have an eerie way of rustling or swishing about. In the intense silence even ants make quite a noise as they creep about among the dead leaves on the ground.

For a long time nothing happened. Every quarter of an hour Biggles whispered, "All's well ", and we replied as arranged. Apart from a few bats, about the size of our own, flitting across the face of the moon, there was little to see. I noticed a rat. He passed me quite close. He seemed to be turning over little stones, looking for something underneath them. Once he stopped and had a good look at me. Then he went about his business and disappeared on the far side of the dell. Obviously, he was not the culprit.

Then I saw an odd thing. It was nothing to be afraid of. In fact, I was amused. One of the little bats suddenly swooped down and hung on to a dead stalk quite close to my feet.

From there he hopped to the ground. Then he began what seemed to be an extraordinary series of antics—still without alarming me. Looking like a little fat mouse, he began to run towards me in a series

of sideway rushes, each rush bringing him nearer. At last he was so close that I could see his tiny eyes shining. They glinted red in the moonlight. At that stage my impression was that either the little creature had hurt itself, or else it was looking for worms on the ground. Then, suddenly, without a sound, it took wing and hovered in front of my face, about a yard away. Its wings moved so quickly that I couldn't

watch them. It was rather like a humming bird, except that this little creature swung slightly from side to side. Even then all I thought was what an extraordinary thing to do. I wondered what it was after. Not for an instant did I suppose that it was after me.

I find it difficult to describe what happened next. I've never been a believer in hypnotism, but the effect of this swinging in front of my eyes must have been hypnotic. I just sat and stared; and as I stared the use went out of my limbs. It was like having gas at the dentist'

s. I could feel myself going off. The dickens of it was, I could do nothing about it. I suppose I was too far gone. Then in a vague sort of way I was aware of the bat coming closer. Then the fluttering ceased, and I knew it had settled on me. There was a tiny prick in my throat that might have been made by the sharpest needle imaginable. And that's all I remember. The next thing I knew I was lying on my back on the camp-bed in our house with the others standing round me. Donald, in his shirt sleeves, was holding a bottle near my nose. I heard him say, "It's all right, he's coming round."

In ten minutes I was sitting up drinking hot milk and telling them what had happened. It appeared that I had failed to answer "All's well" when my turn came. Promptly investigating, they had found me unconscious. They had seen the bat fly off my face, just as a number of others were coming down for a meal. I had been unconscious for about an hour, and then the Doctor had brought me round.

As he put his instruments away he gave us his views. "We know now that the thing is a bat, evidently a new species," he said. "First it mesmerizes its victim, in much the same way that a hypnotist mesmerizes a subject by passing his hands in front of a person's face. Then it settles, and reduces the victim to complete unconsciousness by means of a fluid injected through a tiny tube, in the manner of a hypodermic needle. It then proceeds to satisfy its hunger, in which nasty business it is joined by hundreds of others."

But surely it would take a lot of bats to kill a man ? " I questioned.

"There were a lot of bats in the air at the time, and had we not interrupted the programme doubtless others would ha've arrived. The creature is, of course, a yam pire bat, evidently a new species; at any rate, it is unknown to me. Had such a creature always been in existence we should certainly have heard about it before this."

"What are we going to do about it?" I asked, feeling my face, which was still stiff from the effects of the injection.

"We've got to find the colony, and exterminate every single bat," declared Biggles. "It doesn't take much imagination to visualize what will happen if the little horrors breed and form new colonies. The islands, perhaps the whole of Central America, will become uninhabitable. It is to be hoped that so far there is only one colony of the voracious little brutes. It may not be easy to find, but we must make every effort."

"It should not be difficult," asserted Donald. "All known species of bats, having nocturnal habits, live in caves, hollow trees, or similar places, where they can remain in darkness during the day. If these little wretches have the same habit, and we may suppose they have, we ought to be able to find their headquarters. We'll get busy in the morning."

We got busy, too, but we didn't find the nest. I may mention that I felt no ill effects from the previous night's experience, and was able to join in the search. We were more than a week finding the place, and then we—or rather, Algy—only came across it by accident.

We were on a hillside, and he was climbing up a tangle of lianas to reach a ridge higher up, thinking there might be a cave there, when he shouted down to us that he could hardly breathe for the stink. The next moment he came sliding down, looking a bit shaken. "I've found 'em," he gasped. "They're in a crack in the rock, in a kind of recess, behind those lianas."

Well, we clambered up, and pulling the lianas aside, found that they concealed a long shallow cavity in the face of the cliff. It looked as if a lump of rock had fallen out, as sometimes happens in a cliff at the seaside due to the action of wind or water. There was plenty of room to move about. There was no sign of the bats, but we guessed they were there by the frightful stench. Long streaks of what looked like black treacle, oozing from a crack, told us where the creatures were.

Donald stepped forward, torch in hand, and shining the beam into the

crack, took a peep.

"Yes," he said, "here they are—thousands of them. " Passing me the torch he added, "

Have a look."

As long as I live I shan't forget the sight that met my eyes. The crack, for as far as it extended, was packed with bats, piled on each other like bees in a hive. Their little eyes shone like sparks of fire as they stared at me, those behind pushing their way forward to get a look. With their little pointed ears flat back on their heads, like angry terriers, their lips curled, showing their flat pointed teeth, and their faces twisted into expressions of diabolical fury—well, even now the picture sometimes haunts my dreams. There was a noise which at first I couldn't account for; but when I realized with a shock that it was the grinding and gnashing of innumerable little teeth, I don't mind telling you that I stepped back quickly.

"What are we going to do with them now we've found them?" asked Biggles.

"They must be destroyed," declared Donald firmly. "The most humane way of disposing of them would be to asphyxiate them with gas."

Algy, in the meantime, was having a look. What possessed him to do such a thing I don't know, but plucking a stick, he gave the little beasts a poke. That did it. Before you could say Jack Robinson they were pouring out of that hole like a swarm of hornets. And they didn't just come out and fly away. They came straight at us, ripping at our faces with their teeth.

Biggles let out a yell. "Run for it ! " he shouted, and we needed no second invitation. We slid down those lianas a lot faster than we had come up. When we got to the bottom Biggles looked round "Where's Donald ? " he said. He wasn't with us. Back went Biggles up the vines, and presently he reappeared with the limp form of Donald over his shoulder. Why the bats had particularly made for the Doctor I don't know, but' he was smothered with the brutes.

Striking and slashing at the swarm, we got Donald clear and made for the village. By the time we got to it we were all in a bad way, but Donald had been fairly stuffed full of poison. We did all we could for him. In our anxiety we forgot all about the bats. Later that evening, when we went outside for a breath of fresh air, we saw a mighty column of smoke going up. It looked like a volcano.

The natives, it seemed, had—unknown to us—been watching us. They saw the bats put us to flight, and they watched them return to their lair. Then they decided to take matters into their own hands, and I can't say that I blamed them. They covered the face of that cliff with an enormous heap of dry brushwood and then set fire to it. The bats must have been suffocated in the smoke. Not one escaped—or if it did, it has kept quiet, for from that day to this there has been no recurrence of the trouble. As soon as we were well enough to travel we flew Donald back home, and after that experience he decided to take things quietly for a while.

Ginger got up. "I think that story illustrates my contention," he declared. "If those bats hadn't developed a secret weapon—well, I don't know what you'd call it. Now I'm going for a stroll."

Document Outline

- 07-49 plain

- ☐ [Page 1](#)
- ☐ [Page 2](#)
- ☐ [Page 3](#)
- ☐ [Page 4](#)
- ☐ [Page 5](#)
- ☐ [Page 6](#)
- ☐ [Page 7](#)
- ☐ [Page 8](#)
- ☐ [Page 9](#)
- ☐ [Page 10](#)
- ☐ [Page 11](#)
- ☐ [Page 12](#)
- ☐ [Page 13](#)
- ☐ [Page 14](#)
- ☐ [Page 15](#)
- ☐ [Page 16](#)
- ☐ [Page 17](#)
- ☐ [Page 18](#)
- ☐ [Page 19](#)
- ☐ [Page 20](#)
- ☐ [Page 21](#)
- ☐ [Page 22](#)

- 50-99 plain

- ☐ [Page 1](#)
- ☐ [Page 2](#)
- ☐ [Page 3](#)
- ☐ [Page 4](#)
- ☐ [Page 5](#)
- ☐ [Page 6](#)
- ☐ [Page 7](#)
- ☐ [Page 8](#)
- ☐ [Page 9](#)
- ☐ [Page 10](#)
- ☐ [Page 11](#)
- ☐ [Page 12](#)
- ☐ [Page 13](#)
- ☐ [Page 14](#)
- ☐ [Page 15](#)
- ☐ [Page 16](#)
- ☐ [Page 17](#)
- ☐ [Page 18](#)

- ☐ [Page 19](#)
- ☐ [Page 20](#)
- ☐ [Page 21](#)
- ☐ [Page 22](#)
- ☐ [Page 23](#)
- ☐ [Page 24](#)
- ☐ [Page 25](#)

• 100-157 plain

- ☐ [Page 1](#)
- ☐ [Page 2](#)
- ☐ [Page 3](#)
- ☐ [Page 4](#)
- ☐ [Page 5](#)
- ☐ [Page 6](#)
- ☐ [Page 7](#)
- ☐ [Page 8](#)
- ☐ [Page 9](#)
- ☐ [Page 10](#)
- ☐ [Page 11](#)
- ☐ [Page 12](#)
- ☐ [Page 13](#)
- ☐ [Page 14](#)
- ☐ [Page 15](#)
- ☐ [Page 16](#)
- ☐ [Page 17](#)
- ☐ [Page 18](#)
- ☐ [Page 19](#)
- ☐ [Page 20](#)
- ☐ [Page 21](#)
- ☐ [Page 22](#)
- ☐ [Page 23](#)
- ☐ [Page 24](#)
- ☐ [Page 25](#)
- ☐ [Page 26](#)
- ☐ [Page 27](#)
- ☐ [Page 28](#)
- ☐ [Page 29](#)